



DISHONOR THY WIFE

BELINDA AUSTIN

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By

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August 27, 2015

I AM NOT THE MANIAC WHO FILMED A HOME VIDEO STARRING HIMSELF KNIFING A WOMAN TO DEATH. I do know the victim, which makes my incarceration even stickier. Her picture hangs on the wall of my bedroom and get this; she is wearing a wedding gown. I am a heartbreaker, not a killer, a deceiver, not a liar. Yeah, there is a difference.

Handcuffs blister my wrists. The cops will be here any moment to torture me into a confession. Officer Big Boobs will smother me with her chest. She calls me her *psycho lockup* and flirts. How sick is that?

Some men laugh when they are nervous; I recite music lyrics. The group *Pulp* has a raw edge that grates my soul. “You’re the body hidden in my trunk. You’re the last drink I never should have drunk. You are the cut that makes me hide my face. You are my secrets on the front page every week.”

According to the *Bible*, I am an adulterer—my alibi is another man’s wife. The *Book of Exodus* quotes that *the sins of the father are visited upon the son*. Well, my father, whoever he is, should have kept his pants zipped up—like father, like son! *Exodus*, right—I should have fled across the border to Canada earlier but wanted to protect her.

Running away was cowardly, abandoning her unconscionable, and there are enough sins on my plate.

Do not trust anyone—above all her, my sweet alibi! If she ever finds out how many lies I have told...no, make those untruths, a kinder, gentler word.

My trouble started at a bar in Philadelphia and one too many drinks of AMF.

Hell, my snake pit really began on the day I was born.

Sh! There are footsteps outside the interrogation room.

* * *

Part One: The Game

May 23rd; Austin, Texas 13 Weeks Earlier

Chapter 1

Glaring from the screen of my ebook-reader was the cover of a book downloaded at Kennedy airport—*How to Be a Good Husband for Dummies Whose Wives Are Clueless about What Kind of Shits They Are Married to or just how Far the Cheats Will Go to Get what They Want*. I must have been smashed while waiting for the plane to Austin to agree to a scheme so distasteful, illegal, immoral, so...

I yanked out a prescription pad with the name *Dr. Brad O'Boyle*, and scribbled with a shaky hand.

Note: Call in the morning and tell him I want to back out. The scam is too risky. We will be caught!

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Crap! He would call me a weak pussy for changing my mind. He might laugh in my face as he did when he first proposed the conspiracy at the medical conference in Philly. He talked me into treachery by drowning me with liquor and his words “we should be best friends. Long time no see!”

My nerves rattled so much I could not remember the wife's name. *Think! Think, you moron! Jackie Daniels? Ginny Beam? Cherry Brandy? Sherry Wine?*

Well here goes, one foot in front of the other, only about 20 steps from the car to the door. Empty miniatures rattled in my suit pockets. Wheeling a suitcase helped my mobility, like pushing a wheelchair.

Damn keys would not open the frickin' garage door! Maybe this last key, the one shaped like a guitar could open a hole like a rock star.

The light sensor of the laundry room blasted my eyes like a *Star Wars* lightsaber. I hummed two verses of the Darth Vader Imperial Death March. “Dum dum dum, dum dee dum...what what is the wife's name?”

Oh, God, why did I consent in Philly to such a wicked scheme? I grabbed a paper sack near the sink and breathed into the bag to avoid passing out from hyperventilation. A picture of a bridal couple leered in the harsh light of the den. That mousy brunette in the picture was my wife, but at least she was temporary. Like mother, like daughter, her mom had been a stripper. In the wedding photo, she appeared the opposite of her mother, more like a nun dressed in a simple wedding gown of bone-colored satin with jet-black hair pulled back from her pinched face. She resembled a Mormon wife from a polygamist compound or one of Charlie Manson's girls with eyes wide open like a zombie.

I sang some drunken notes to the Rolling Stones song, *Sympathy for the Devil*.

Speak of the devil; she shuffled into the den. "You're home," she said in a flat voice.

How very observant of you, my dear. One would think you had a brain. I was too chicken to voice my sarcasm. I guzzled the rest of my martini, choking on onions, olives, and maybe toothpicks. Quick, I flipped through mail on the kitchen counter and glared at the name *Ronni O'Boyle* stamped across a department store bill. Right, Ronni was a short, masculine name for Veronica, a shopaholic who sucked a man's credit cards dry. The woman was a ball buster, born on the wrong side of the tracks. She dropped out of high school at 17 and recently earned her GED. She was now attending college to become a dental assistant. Whoop-de-do! Trailer-trash Ronni won the lottery when she married a doctor.

Well here goes, now it begins, a devious plan concocted in Philly. "You look nice, Ronni." Wow! My voice had gone up as if she clenched my balls because the wife looked unbelievably sexy. In soft light, she appeared almost pretty with her hair mussed. One strap of her t-shirt drooped over her shoulder.

Okay, down boy! Quit picturing how she would look with pointy nipples tingling with excitement, and legs spread wide, hips humping. I cursed the desire welling inside my dark soul. I must not sleep with her—ever! That was our agreement. "Ronni?" I said in a eunuch voice.

"Well, who were you expecting, Brad? Fool!"

Next to the wedding picture was a photo of a child, supposedly my daughter. The oldest trick in the book was to trap a man with pregnancy.

“No one calls me a fool and gets away with it!”

She ran towards the stairs.

My legs were longer and I grabbed her arm, laughing at her kicking and missing.

I spun her around, trapping her with my arms. Our bodies touched everywhere and I held her even tighter. “You smell of jasmine,” I moaned, lowering her to the stairs and raining kisses across her neck. Her wiggling aroused me beyond belief. I throbbed, pounding with such pressure; all I could think of was easing my pain in Ronni. My blood rushed to that one spot where my need was desperate. At this moment, the act was worth any price. Guilt could come later. I closed my eyes, and muttered, “God, I promise to say ten Hail Marys later even though I’m not Catholic.”

I shoved her hand on my pants, rubbing her palm against me. “Please, I need you, Ronni. Feel how much I want you. I need you so much, Ronni. Please, stroke me, pet me. Yeah, that’s it. More!”

She quit struggling and groaned.

I removed my hand and she continued rubbing. Squeezing. Pulling. Caressing.

My breath came in deep gasps. “Unzip me,” I panted and tugged at the zipper of her pants, my fingers clumsily poking her.

“Ouch, get off me you oaf!”

She slapped my cheek hard, sobering me, making me remember who we were and that bed was out of the question between us. “Again, Brad? You’re raping me again?”

I stood, straightening my pants and feeling rather sheepish about the rape thing. I plunked down on a step to conceal my throbbing arousal, looking like a petulant child. Any moment now, I might have a temper tantrum—Ronni really should give out to her husband. She was a tramp, just as her mother had been.

“I wish you stayed in Philadelphia permanently, Brad, or the plane crashed,” she snapped.

I never struck a woman in my life and clenched my hands into fists, resisting the urge to punch her. It took a minute for my pants to deflate. I then stumbled up the stairs, banging my ankle against the last step.

At the end of the hallway was a view of a woman’s room, decorated with flowers and all that female crap, the sanctity of the wife’s four-poster bed.

Ronni narrowed her eyes and hissed. “You know you can’t sleep in here, Brad! Drop dead, sucker.” She slammed her bedroom door, shaking the rafters.

I made a jerking off motion at the closed door. “Far be it from me to invade the sanctity of your bedroom!” It was the liquor else, I would never have attempted sex with Ronni. Nor would I be having a conversation with a door and flipping off the wood. One more drop of liquor and I would try to have sex with the door.

I dropped to my knees poking my eye at the keyhole.

She peeled off her pants, revealing long sexy legs and muscles bulging from still wearing heels. Ah, she was wearing black boyshorts, a woman confident enough with her own femininity to wear a girly take on snug, tiny boxer shorts. Mm, instead of a bulge the panties showed her slit.

She yanked off her blouse revealing a pink lacy bra.

Oops, my knees creaked and my breathing had gone sex heavy. Damn, she quit undressing!

A soaking wet washrag flew across the bedroom, connecting with the doorknob and splashing my eye, startling me so much, I fell on my ass.

I staggered down the hallway trying to find my room. *Have to honor our agreement of no sex with the wife. Must honor our agreement.*

I yanked off my tie but then the sports decor of the other master bedroom, engulfed me with warmth. I hugged each of the trophies of soccer, basketball, football, and even baseball, rubbing my cheek on the

cold statues. The trophies went all the way back to Little League and up to high school.

This room was *the* coolest man cave. *Star Wars* paraphernalia and posters of playboy bunnies surrounded the room.

I lay on the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Bedsread Edition* bare-chested, rubbing my nipples. Desire still heated my blood, and I drilled against the sheets, imagining rubbing inside the wife even though I pushed against Miss January's luscious, wide-open, cherry-red lips. *Yeah, baby, right there where my body throbs with need. Faster. Yeah, move, virgin.* "Oh," I groaned.

Ronni's bedroom door opened and footsteps padded down the hallway, and then pounded down the stairs.

I threw the covers over my head, wondering if the wife heard me acting like a horny teenage boy. Maybe my moans turned her on and she would come to my room. *Please. Please. Please.*

The refrigerator door closed, followed by the garbage disposal grinding up my dick.

What in all that is unholy came over me to attempt to seduce Ronni? At a bar in Philadelphia, I had drunkenly stared at her wallet photo, wishing I never made a deal with...I was no husband, more like an unwanted guest.

Misgivings once more churned my stomach, making my stomach growl with nervous hunger. The kitchen was off limits because Ronni was in her dungeon mixing poisons or doing whatever it is wives do when they plunge their hands into the garbage disposal. The only food in the bedroom was a bag of stale airline peanuts, the salt causing an unbearable thirst in my wine-dried mouth.

There was a bathroom off the bedroom and I shoved my head under the faucet. The mirror reflected water running down my chin. How pathetic to be holding a dirty tissue smudged with semen from having screwed the bedsread. In this light, I appeared ominous—no wonder Ronni acted afraid. Damn Philadelphia, I never should have gone along with the plan! I

punched the mirror; shattering the glass and making my reflection appear jagged.

You deserve to have your face cracked, fool!

With a shard of mirror, I sliced my neck, just a scratch, to remind me to leave Ronni alone. I can get through these weeks if Ronni keeps her distance, yet my hands shook as I dried them on a towel with the initials BO. An egotist puts his initials on his towels. Once more, I loathed myself for what I plotted for the next weeks.

I lay beneath the covers shivering, dreading going into the office in the morning and pretending that nothing was different and that I had not changed since Philadelphia.

I pulled at my face, feeling the imaginary cracks I had seen in the shattered mirror.

Footsteps pounded up the stairs and Ronni's bedroom door closed.

There. She turned in her sleep.

I closed my eyes, imagining Ronni wearing a pink airy thong sliding up the crack of her butt.

Okay, get some sleep. Quit walking in quicksand.

What the fu...? A jarring noise screeched from a radio on the night table followed by a voice blaring, "The National Weather Service in Austin has issued a tornado warning for Travis County, Williamson County, and Hays County. There are multiple tornados headed your way! Blow away butthead!"

Goddamn it was dark like the devil's assholes—Ohmigosh, I passed out wearing a Darth Vader helmet!

I ripped the helmet from my sweaty head and felt a stirring in the center of my universe—ah, the force awakened. I slammed the off button of the weather alarm radio, groaning about that part of my body. I had done stupid things in my life, but this fiasco was the most idiotic venture.

The National Weather Service in Austin issued a tornado up my rear, twirling my insides, causing stress burps, and a ball tightening right below the ribcage.

For a short time, I could bluff my way into being a good husband. After a couple of weeks, I would be rid of Ronni for good and never have to see her accusing eyes again.

What a roaring start, nearly raping the wife, idiot!

It was only two in the morning, still time for a good night's sleep to help me face the patients in the morning.

I dreamt of chasing my shadow, which was completely detached with a mind and personality all its own. My shadow laughed wickedly as it ran through a dreary ally punching women, kicking the homeless, and breaking a few necks.

I finally caught up with my shadow, and we jogged on a Philly street alongside a garbage truck littered with stinking corpses.

We ran up the steps of the Museum of Art and bounced, punching each other. (Have you ever done shadow punching and lost?) My shadow raised its fist in triumph like Sylvester Stallone in the film *Rocky*.

The music to the *Rocky* movie played in the background as my shadow and I both swung by our necks beneath a tree in Philadelphia, across from the south facade of Independence Hall.

Odd, no bystanders had cheered our jogging like in the movie, but everyone cheered our hanging. The pigeons were dead in the park.

The weather alarm radio went off again, waking me from the nightmare.

Thank God for tornados!

Chapter 2

WIFE

Even the cat was relaxed while Brad was in Philadelphia. Brad named our daughter's beige and white tabby cat *Pussy*, thinking it a great joke.

While Brad was gone, *Pussy* meditated, sitting in a yoga pose on Brad's recliner with her eyes closed, legs wide open, whiskers droopy, and tongue hanging out. *Pussy* crossed her paws in Buddha fashion, her claws retracted.

I was relaxed enough to meditate with *Pussy*. There was no Brad yelling, "Ronni, my home looks like a donkey lives here!" Well, Brad, you live here and *you* are an ass.

"What's all this straw on the floor? And cat hair, too! I am going to drown *Pussy* if you do not keep this house cleaner! *My* house, Ronni! This is *my* house! *Pussy*, quit coughing up hairballs! I am gonna get me a pit bull to clean up your box while you're using it!"

Meow!

Brad dropped his suitcase in the den and *Pussy* flung her body against the wall, falling to the floor, unconscious.

Brad must have had fun at the medical conference. His eyes were bloodshot as if he barely survived a weeklong party with nurses jumping from cakes.

His snoring is keeping me awake. Brad has never snored before.

When we lay on the stairs like two stacked pancakes, my nose in his collar, he smelled somewhat syrupy. I forgot liking Brad's sticky sweet smell.

When he removed his body from on top of me, I somehow felt cheated. I actually clenched my hands to keep from hitting him and yelling, "Is that all there is?" It took all my control to hide my shaking desire, and unfulfilled...what? What exactly is missing in this sex puzzle thingy?

Ugh! I wanted to have sex with Brad O'Boyle! Mama was a prostitute and I'm afraid to be like her. *And I am. I am.*

Brad's fingers fluttered like butterfly wings across my vibrating stomach, and stopped...at the center of my universe.

His hand cupped my crotch, pressing against me, the heat of his skin seeping beneath the denim. I actually whimpered.

I now kick the sheets off, writhing on the bed, my hair sticking to my neck. Oh, God where is the cool air? Have I suddenly become a fallen angel? I am mortified to have grabbed my husband, rubbing my hand against the lump in his pants that was so hard and hot even through the fabric. *I hate you, Brad O'Boyle! Do not ever touch me again!*

The stink of a woman was on him, some female sweating between the legs for Brad O'Boyle. Most likely, he drove straight home from his mistress of the dark that tramp Barbie. She must not have put out for Brad, which is why he nearly raped me—again. I was 17 then but should know better now. Brad still insists there is no such thing as date rape. *A guy knows when a girl wants it*, is his motto. Well *statutory rape* has the word *rape*, date or not.

The last time my husband showed any interest in having sex with me was about six years ago. Now, suddenly Brad returns from Philadelphia and is climbing all over me and panting like a horny teen.

My best friend Riley and I, when we were high school juniors, managed to climb out the window one Saturday night and hitchhike to Sixth Street. Yippee, Sixth Street is always one big weekend party with nightclubs and music, where college students hang out getting drunk, begging to get laid. Our butts jiggled in short-shorts with blouses tied above our flat stomachs. We were sticky hot chicks, clicking our stiletto heels up Six Street, sweating up a storm, and rubbing elbows with the midnight crowd. We slapped fake ids of women a decade older looking nothing like us, into the wet palms of bouncers whose eyes never strayed from our boobies.

At the third club, stood handsome Brad O'Boyle, rich intern, lounging against the bar to keep from falling down drunk. We danced or he danced

all over me. We talked; actually, he slurred, I talked; and then we began seeing each other in secret.

Do not judge a poor, ignorant girl for trusting a man because of one motion picture show and two hamburgers. I was a naïve virgin who never heard of date rape. When Brad begged to lie on top of me on the grass, I did not know his lump against my leg meant danger. “What is that,” I had whispered.

“I promise not to do anything bad to you, Ronni. You’ll like it, trust me.” He groaned as if hurting. “I need you,” he moaned and stupid I believed a doctor only spoke the truth. Brad needed *me*.

A desperate, naïve girl believes two dates signifies a relationship. She mixes up sex with love, and makes excuses for rape. *He had too much to drink. He is really a good man. He does not apologize because he feels guilty. He really believes all that Love Story movie bullshit about love means never having to say you are sorry, ever*—omens of futures filled with screw you, Ronni!

Tonight, Brad returns from Philadelphia, and his walk is slightly off, as if unsure of himself. He acts passionate with *me*. Tonight, my husband made me long for a loving marriage and then I remember that the alternative to Brad marrying me was prison. My grandfather, Pops, put a shotgun to Brad’s head and threatened statutory rape charges, to force him to marry me because he knocked me up.

I now tiptoe to the bedroom door and snap the lock in place.

Brad is up to something. He actually wanted me and in a sexual way, not his normal way of screwing with my head and my heart. When I was in the kitchen earlier, I grabbed a screwdriver from the junk drawer and hid it under my pillow.

I’ll screw Brad all right, with this! I lunge at the air with the nine-inch-shaft screwdriver several times. I shift to the other arm. The movie *Psycho* is my favorite. This is fun, quite a workout, *arms of screwdriver steel*. I should videotape myself and upload it on YouTube. *Ronni’s Exercise Video—Five Minutes to Sculpting Your Husband*. A million hits!

I wear myself out with plunging and then tuck the screwdriver beneath my pillow. The feel of cold steel seduces me to sleep.

I dream of a big black hole. I grip the sides, trying to climb out as a man with a shadowy face shovels dirt, filling the hole and smothering me.

I wake up in the morning with a gritty mouth and fling the blankets over my head, shivering and coughing.

Scary, shitty nightmare seemed real.

Chapter 3

HUSBAND

They have a saying in Texas; if you don't like the weather, come back in five minutes. Last night a tornado blew me in from Philly. This morning, the weather alarm radio screeched, "The National Weather Service in Austin has issued a flash flood warning for Travis County, and Williamson County. Drown dickhead!"

I might have missed the toilet in a flash flood and then slipped. How in the hell did I wind up sleeping on the toilet rug?

I do not usually drink until wasted any more but my new best friend from the medical conference hung out in the bars with me for my flight home yesterday or should I say flights home. We rebooked our flights so we could continue to party. We drank our way through the airports of Philadelphia, Boston, and New York where we then separated, me headed for Austin.

He gave me a goodbye hug and said, "Good luck, and don't be nervous. Everything will go as planned. For a hangover, the Germans eat raw herring with onions and a pickle. Or you could chew the dried penis of a bull like Sicilians do."

Raw pickled herring with onions or dried bull penis. I shoved my head in the toilet and vomited up to the eighth level of dry heaves.

No little girl should ever witness her father in his underwear hugging the toilet bowl and stinking of vomit and piss.

Traci stared with big, luminous eyes. She was small for a six-year-old. Her stringy hair made her resemble a scarecrow.

She took a step back with hands clasped behind her back and her face stretched tight.

"You can come in, kid, no need to be afraid of a pint of fermented grain mash. Whiskey after a hangover is like rotten toast with rancid butter." I stood on rocky feet, a black sock sagging around one ankle. I

yanked my undershorts higher on my waist. Odd, being shirtless and not wearing pants in front of Traci did not cause discomfort. On the other hand, not having a watch on my wrist made me feel undignified.

The kid had the balls to flush the toilet but seemed shy. After being gone for over a week, a little girl should throw herself in her daddy's arms. *Quit staring kid, as if at an alien. I removed the Darth Vader helmet yet you are still making me feel like I am breathing in an iron lung.*

Traci took a shaky breath.

“Uh, sorry I didn't bring you anything from Philadelphia, Traci. I, uh, forgot.”

Traci stood with her hands hanging limp at her sides. The child inherited from her mother a gift for making me feel like a heel. “Well, uh, I have to get ready for work.”

“Okey-dokey.” She skipped towards the bedroom door.

“Hey, Kid! Have a good day at school, huh?”

The sight of Traci smiling as if she liked me turned my insides to mush.

She waved before she ran out the door and I wiggled my fingers, grinning crookedly. I would have liked to have pecked Traci on the cheek but we did not have that type of relationship.

In the light of day, the bedroom engulfed me with joy, and I giggled like a girl. Each of the photos in the room was of a young boy at various ages and I held the pictures up to the mirror in comparison. I was the young age of 32 but getting older was still a bitch. Nowhere in this thoroughly masculine bedroom were there any pictures of the wife or kid, but then it was a man's domain.

My head was like a balloon about to pop and my mouth tasted like dog shit.

I felt more human after a shave and shower and was thinking of sneaking out the back door to avoid Ronni and then she yelled, “Come on, Traci, let's go,” followed by the front door slamming.

There was 45 minutes before work, the house all to myself, and Ronni's bedroom door was unlocked!

The décor was virginal with a white eyelet, frilly bed cover and a swirly white-ruffled canopy. A row of red and white teddy bears reclined against a mountain of fluffy pillows.

A mirror swept around the dresser so that a vain woman could see not just the front of her face but the sides of her face as well.

A print of a *Gustav Klint* painting hung on a wall. The print was *The Kiss* portraying a couple beneath gold blankets. The man was kissing the woman but held her head at such an angle on her shoulders that she appeared beheaded. The woman in the painting sort of resembled Ronni. Yeah, the wife would look just as pretty with her head cut off and sort of tilting on her neck. One little jiggle and her head would roll down her arm and bounce on the carpet.

One of the dresser drawers was slightly open revealing a row of underpants prettily lined in a row like a garden of delights. Red. Black. White. Navy blue. Lace. Bikini. Hot pink. Sexy boy shorts.

Ronni, Ronni, quite contrary, how do your panties grow?

With silver balls and cock shells and pretty puss all in a row.

My face grew hot when stroking the lingerie. Only a peeping Tom would gawk into a woman's panty drawer. Jesus, I should have left well enough alone. Now every time Ronni walks by I will imagine...I yanked the sexiest panties from the drawer and rubbed the black silk triangle, a thong no more than a crack up a rounded butt and a small tent to hide *Mount Bushmore*. I had never been a thief but now shoved the panties in my pants pocket.

I drove to work, distracted by an image of Ronni modeling her undies. Her underwear so tangled my mind that I got lost for seven minutes but finally found the office.

I felt creepy and transparent walking into the office. *They will know I have changed. They will smell the wolf on me.*

Whew, the staff is all smiles!

The redheaded receptionist, Brandy, placed the files of today's appointments on the desk along with the schedule for the week. It was going to be a long day and a half-full bottle of whiskey in the right top drawer of the desk was tempting, but drinking on the job would not be added to my list of sins.

In the left top drawer of the desk was a framed 8 x 10 of a Texas beauty queen with a plastic smile and a greedy look in her blue eyes. A flowery signature was scrawled across the photo: *To Brad, love forever. Your poopsi whoopsi, Barbie.*

Brandy sashayed into the office and dropped a load of file folders on the desk. She leaned across and the top three buttons of her blouse popped open.

I slammed the drawer shut, hiding Barbie's picture.

Brandy whispered in a little girl voice, "I missed you, boss man." She ran a finger down my sideburn.

I pushed the chair back from the desk, grinding the wheels in a nervous whine. "Well that's, uh, very nice of you, Brandy." A wedding ring with a large diamond circled Brandy's finger. "I don't want your husband blowing my head off. Just cool it for now, okay?"

"Yes, doctor huge." She sashayed back out of the office, wiggling her tight ass in an exaggerated fashion.

I tiptoed to the door, locked it, and then made a phone call.

A receptionist, a woman by the name of Irene, answered. "Dr. Tremblay did not come into the office today."

"Jayden canceled all his appointments? Is Dr. Tremblay sick?"

"Dr. Tremblay said you might be calling, Dr. O'Boyle. He said not to worry. Everything is under control."

Under control, huh? That is what he said in Philly.

I gave a heartfelt sigh, my balls sucking into my body and pushing against my kidneys in frozen fear. “Have you ever done anything you’ve regretted, Irene?”

“Sure. Who hasn’t?”

“Well, it was good to hear your voice.” I hung up with a shaky hand. Irene had a motherly sounding voice, and I almost confessed everything to her.

Chapter 4

WIFE

It has been a week since my husband came home from Philadelphia and Brad has not turned back into a frog. Hell must be freezing over if my husband has really shed his skin into a new-and-improved Brad.

Our daughter no longer hides behind the sofa when he is at home. Brad sits on the recliner watching television, holding Traci on his lap. He watches the children's station while *Pussy* sits on the arm of the chair, licking her paws and cleaning her fur.

Brad plays computer games with Traci, or reads to her. He helps our daughter with her homework. For the first time in our marriage, Brad is acting like a daddy, and Traci is blossoming.

In the morning, he fixes two bowls of cereal and eats breakfast with Traci. He ruffles her hair and yanks her ear. Giggles fill the kitchen.

"Would you mind driving Traci to school? It's just for this one morning." I try to keep the whiny pleading from my voice because Brad has told me countless times, "When you are in one of your pathetic moods your voice rises, making you sound like a cat in heat."

"Sure, I'll drive the kid." Brad drops a few strawberries in Traci's cereal bowl. He does not scream about how, "I am too busy to drive the damn kid! My job is more important than your measly dental appointment! You are a lazy-ass parasite taking part-time classes yet want me to drive your daughter to school? I put a roof over your head and feed you both, and now you expect me to drive Traci? Well, screw you, bitch!"

Nor does Brad kick over the kitchen chair and throw his cereal bowl at the wall.

"Have a nice day and I hope your visit at the dentist is not painful," he adds.

"Thanks," I mumble, unused to kindness in his voice.

Quick! Run out the door before he changes his mind about Traci!

Chapter 5

WIFE

This evening, again none of the cars is missing from the garage. Brad has suddenly become a homebody. He even loads the dirty dishes in the dishwasher. A devil does not suddenly change into an angel. The one and only time I ever asked him to clean up the kitchen, he broke all the dishes in the sink. “Oops, sorry, Ronni, slippery fingers. Ha!” He then picked up a carving knife and jabbed the blade at me. He then stomped on the dishtowel and flung it at my face. So forgive me for repeating that the new Brad is odd.

He has never enjoyed reading classics before but Brad sits on a comfortable study chair reading *Pride and Prejudice* of all books and a paperback no less. Brad has always claimed to prefer the *True Crime* genre and reads ebooks but more likely smutty pornographic hard-core erotica.

The study is my homework domain in the evening. I push the power button on the computer and cough as a hint for Brad to take his book elsewhere.

He burrows his rump more comfortably into the leather chair, turning the pages.

Fine, I am used to ignoring you. I wrap myself in an imaginary cocoon and pretend Brad does not exist. A prophylactic suddenly comes to mind when thinking of a cocoon, with me inside the silk condom vibrating against the sides because of the condom I found in Brad’s pants. He wore the pair when he came home from Philadelphia. I was not snooping but washing clothes. The condom was labeled *Trustex*; like in *trust your ex to still want to have sex with you until he finds someone else*. The wrapper read that the rubber was made of animal membrane, so of course, it belongs to Brad, and did not leap into his pocket from another man’s pants.

Brad lifts his eyes from the book and stares at my legs, rolling his eyes upward. He boldly stops at my crotch and licks his lips as though he can see what pair of panties I am wearing.

I cannot concentrate on my schoolwork because of the creepy feeling that Brad has been spying on me this past week. He is memorizing my routine. Again, he looks at his watch as I walk up the stairs to bed.

“Ronni, whatever you want, just ask.” he says in a voice that would chill wine.

I toss my head, yet a devil in me makes me shake my behind.

“You’re a tease, spreading your legs under your short skirt.” His voice is hoarse with yearning.

My heart rises to my throat. I grip the handrail, deliberately stopping high enough where he can see my panties. *My hand is shaking and my chest, I cannot breathe.*

He slowly begins climbing the stairs and I spread my legs even wider and bend slightly so my skirt rises.

Brad is looking up my skirt, and I am letting him.

I move my rear slightly, a few times in a humping motion, thinking of pole dancing.

He moans slightly and his footsteps quicken.

I walk slower until he catches up to me.

His fingers walk up the zipper of my skirt and grasps at the clasp.

With trembling hands, I grab his thumb to stop him. *Not here, it is too hot. I am going to faint.* “No,” I manage to gulp out, “the past haunts us, Brad.” My voice cracks with remembrance.

He holds up his hands as though burnt by a hot stove and steps back.

Breathless, I scurry down the hallway to the master bedroom and quietly lock the door.

His knees crack as he kneels in the hallway breathing heavily against the wood. Brad is watching at the bedroom door, his eye to the keyhole.

I perform a slow striptease in the bathroom with the door flung open, humming a burlesque song, and probably looking ridiculous as I throw my bra across the room. I pour glass after glass of water on my head to wet my t-shirt.

I stand, facing the door with breasts thrust out and nipples soaking wet.

Surely, he has gotten an eyeful so I drop to the floor and strip off the rest of my clothing.

I crawl to the bed, not wanting him to see my naked sweaty body.

I slide beneath the covers and listen with my breath in my throat.

There is panting outside the door, and God help me, I grow even more excited and touch myself, imagining Brad in my bed, wanting my husband, remembering how he felt when I squeezed him through his pants.

I throw off the covers and leave the light on, knowing that Brad is watching. I loathe him for making me act like Mama.

At the age of ten, I snuck out of the house to the titty bar Mama worked at. I hid under a table and watched while she stripped in front of leering men. One gruff-looking biker stuck his hand in her underpants, filling her crotch with cash.

When it was the next stripper's turn, Mama went to the alley with the biker who gave her 10 five-dollar bills.

I hid inside the garbage can with the lid lifted an inch, spying on my alley-cat mama.

The girl I once was with stringy hair, hollow stomach and a face washed with spit, still lives inside me. That poor pathetic child cries out, her heart wringing because her mama abandoned her when she was ten, running off with the biker who didn't like children.

The child inside me still longs for the daddy she never knew, and searches for *respect* in the face of every man she sees. She tells herself, *I am as good as anyone is.*

I often stroke the fine wood and luxurious leather in my Tudor-style mansion and the girl inside me is comforted. I never really expected love in a marriage, not when my own mama left me and my daddy did not want me. The only time I have had sex was the date rape with Brad.

When I first met my husband, his healing hands made me think, *what a wonderful man he is. Here is a man who saves lives.* Soon after marrying, I learned that Brad O'Boyle is more destructive than healthful.

Well, I was never the brightest kid in the projects and am playing a dangerous game with Brad.

I am masturbating while he spies through the keyhole.

And God help me, for the first time in my life, I am enjoying the power of my sex.

Chapter 6

WIFE

Brad is only technically married to me since our marriage is celibate, but if Barbie Simpson was free, Brad might murder me. Ha! I am joking, but still Brad would see me as a threat to his financial health. Pops made sure there was no prenuptial contract, a condition of Brad not going to prison for statutory rape. Brad accused me of not telling him I was 17. “It’s about disclosure, Ronni, full disclosure, something you know nothing about.”

“It’s about disclosure, Brad, full disclosure, something you know nothing about.” Brad never revealed that he was engaged, or that he had a fight with his fiancée Barbie on the day we met. The dumbest lie a girl can tell herself is *he did not tell you about his fiancé because he loves you and does not want to lose you.*

It will take about four years attending college part-time to become a dental hygienist and earn financial independence. Given Brad’s volatile moods, I plan to walk out on him then. I was never mean until my husband taught me to be.

I was not always cynical. When we first married, I was naïve enough to think that his anger towards me would abate and we would have a real marriage and live happily ever after. Brad remained cold and distant all through the pregnancy. Traci was born and the baby should have brought us closer together. We created a life, a miracle, but a child born of a loveless marriage widens the gulf between man and wife.

Brad only became friendlier after we made an agreement to stay out of each other’s way. Giving Brad a peep show last night violates our agreement. All week long, I dress like a nun in long skirts and shapeless shirts, my feet in manly shoes. I hover in a corner expecting him to lash out at me for being like my mother.

The darkness eats away his insides—the darkness he usually shows his wife and child. Brad is resisting his mean urges such as yelling, “Goddamnit, Ronni! I told you to hang up my jeans as soon as you take

them out of the dryer! Get your butt over here and iron them!" His rotten behavior is before Philadelphia, and I sniff his shirts before doing the wash but his scent is unchanged.

Traci has become a traitor. A little attention from Brad for the first time in her life and she is all giggles and grins for her father.

This morning Brad says "good morning" and I bark at him,

"Well, who got into your panties?" he says.

"Not you," I snap.

He laughs as if that is the funniest joke he has ever heard. "Your eyes are puffy and red, like you've been crying."

His gentle voice makes me want to slap him. What has Brad been playing at, acting so nice since Philadelphia, yet his eyes appear cold and his smile is creepy. Last time I told him good morning, before Philadelphia transformed him into a kind man, his response was, "go to hell, Ronni." He then pushed my coffee cup with lipstick marks away from him. My favorite cup fell to the floor, shattering to pieces. The cup was in shards but I pieced the words together on the ceramic—*My husband went to Vegas and came back a bigger asshole!* The devil will have to stick his pitchfork up his own butt before I ever wish Brad O'Boyle a good morning again.

"Don't forget about your parents this Sunday," I remind him before he heads out the door for work.

"Parents," he squeaks. Brad is quite the mama's boy yet he pales at the mention of his folks.

"Our usual monthly dinner on Sunday, remember, Brad?"

"Oh, yeah, right. It's just my mind is preoccupied with work." He gives me a peck on the cheek as if we are a normal couple.

I am seriously thinking of driving to one of those custom t-shirt places and having them make up a design on a red t-shirt with words printed in bold white:

My husband returned from Philadelphia with his brain tattooed.

Pussy rubs up against his leg now, making me think Brad has changed.

However, can I really trust a cat that licks my husband's balls?

Chapter 7

HUSBAND

The more Ronni ignored me, the more I purposefully threw myself in her direction. I would kneel in the hallway outside her bedroom door after she retired for the night without even wishing me sweet dreams. Every night my eye looked through her door as if the keyhole was a telescope, watching Ronni strip off her clothes and give into her baser instincts. *She wears a see-through red nightie with a big heart on the chest and wedge heels with straps criss-crossing her long muscular legs like a Roman soldier. Yeah, I could ride her like a horse.*

She was so close yet unattainable and driving me crazy with her striptease and all the other sex games.

She went out Friday evening dressed like she was meeting a boyfriend so I sat on the den sofa with my arms crossed in front of my chest, waiting up for her. She found me amusing when she got back after midnight!

She kicked off her shoes, aiming the heels in my direction and laughing. She had obviously been drinking. “Why in heaven's name are you staying home? Well I go out to get away from your suffering company! You make me sick with your newfound sweetness,” she slurred and threw a beer can at me.

I must be more careful. Ronni accused me of being up to something.

I began making a rocking horse for Traci. I needed something to unleash my pent-up frustration and the violence of cutting wood helped. When I first walked down the steps to the basement, a wave of guilt struck me. Traci watched me make the horse, her eyes dancing. She chattered away as if a bird set free from its cage. It was unpardonable what I was doing to her and her mother.

To make it up to the kid, I was creating a magnificent wooden horse with real horsehair, leather saddle, and beautifully polished.

Ronni again went out Friday wearing a skirt barely covering her buttocks with a big zipper down the front as if she was advertising *Open Me*. I would make one hell of a private eye and did not need the help of a zipper *Yeah, I could take a magnifying glass, bend on my knees, and look up her skirt. Just call me a private dicktective.*

I stood with the garage door slightly ajar, spying on her driving away from the house.

Hers was the Chrysler Cruiser, virginal white with fake wood paneling across the sides.

Mine was the Darth Vader Death Star black Mercedes Benz, a car forged in Hades that drove itself home when the driver was sloshed.

The colorless, grey SUV was ours. The color grey was middle ground, but the wife and I could never meet in Middle-earth except on quicksand. Lint grew beneath the gold band around my sweaty wedding finger—One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them. Except for disliking hairy big feet, I was a fan of *The Lord of the Rings*.

I followed Ronni and with great stealth, parked the black Mercedes several cars behind her Cruiser, watching her walk into a bar a half block from Sixth Street.

I stood on the dark street across from the bar, keys dangling in my hand. I have been tailing Ronni for a while now but her peep show every night had given me the balls to get closer.

I swaggered towards a bar named Lovejoys.

My cockiness vanished as soon as I walked into the bar. I never used to be so sneaky but since Philadelphia, I have changed. I leaned against the bar, one boot on the footrest, and nervously drummed my fingers against the wooden counter. The bar was carved in the shape of a coffin.

What excuse could I make for being at Lovejoys when she left the house just fifteen minutes ago? Ronni was already suspicious of me.

Well, hell's bells, America was supposed to be a free country. I had as much right as anyone to be in Lovejoys.

“Hit me with a beer,” I told the bartender and loosened my tie. I was dressed like a doctor or like an undertaker.

I removed my black suit jacket and slung it across a gold metal pipe that wrapped around the wooden bar. I rolled up the sleeves of my white shirt and yanked a black tie over my head, nearly choking in the process.

I grabbed a mug of beer and guzzled the entire contents. “Hit me again.” I burped.

The rest of Lovejoys looked more like a living room than a bar. Ronni was sitting on a couch with her back to me chatting with another woman. Her friend, Riley, looked cheap. Her skirt rode up her hips, and revealed a bit of white panty.

Ronni and Riley drank the hard stuff and seemed to be having a serious discussion. Neither paid attention to the men in the bar ogling the women. I walked quietly with my hand hiding my face, and then stood against a counter across from them and eavesdropped.

Ronni said, “Brad just seems so different. He is somewhat sweet, you know? He actually fried me eggs for breakfast on Sunday.” Ronni’s shoulders slumped and her chest sunk in. Her voice sounded heartbroken. “I almost hoped...”

“You and Brad might have a happily ever after?” Riley raised an eyebrow. She took out a cigarette and lit the cancer stick. Riley then sucked on the cigarette, turning her face sideways to prevent smoke blowing in Ronni’s face.

“Traci runs down to the basement every day when she comes home from school just to stare at the pieces of the rocking horse he’s making. I swear that horse will rock Traci to heaven when Brad is finished with it.”

“Are we talking about the devil Brad, your husband? Well, I would not trust him. How can a man and woman live in the same house together for over six years and not have sex? Brad has always been a bastard. Your husband propositioned me one time.”

“I know,” Ronni said in a small voice, “but that was a long time ago.”

“That a-hole wanted to have sex with me only because it would be a coup to sleep with your best friend and forever put a wedge between us.” Riley turned her face in my direction and blew cigarette smoke.

I shoved my hand in front of my face but still Riley said, “Well, well, your hubby is spying on us.”

Ronni swung her head over to me and my heart beat so fast everyone at Lovejoys must have heard my blood pumping. I threw some bills on the bar top, grabbed my jacket, and turned towards the door.

Do not even look in her direction, you ass. You will only make things worse.

Ronni jumped in front of me, blocking my path. “Are you following me, Brad?”

“I, uh, came over here to play pool.”

“We have a pool table at home.”

“I wanted a beer.”

“We have beer at home.”

“We don't have my favorite homebrew that is sold only at Lovejoys, *The Leg Spreader*.”

She bit her lip. “Are you, uh, meeting someone here?”

“Nope. Not meeting anybody. No plans. I'm all alone.” I sighed as if I was the loneliest man on the planet. “How about you and I play a game of pool, huh?”

“Mm. We have that pool table at home but you and I have never played a game. What shall we play for, money?”

“If I win,” and my voice dropped two octaves, “you give me what I want.” A sensual gleam lit my eyes and a grin split my face. My voice filled with intimacy making this bar seem too small for the two of us.

“And if I win?” she softly said and swallowed.

“Then, I give you what you want,” I said in a voice that implied she must want the same thing.

“Anything?” She grinned.

“Anything.” We shook hands on the deal.

I stacked up the balls and Ronni broke them.

I raised my eyes to the ceiling and silently swore. The woman knew her game. Three balls went in on the first break. “Hustler,” I muttered.

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing.” Damned if my pool stick skipped and nearly tore a hole in the green fabric of the pool table. I always had bad luck with green felt but figured Ronni would be an easy win.

She chuckled and I gave her a dirty look.

There was nothing like the public humiliation of having your ass kicked in public by a woman. In just four shots Ronni announced, “Eight ball, left corner pocket.” Bam—the ball went in.

“Ball breaker,” I muttered.

“Did you say something, Brad?”

“You win.” I shoved the pool stick back into the holder on the wall, so hard that the holder crashed to the floor and all the pool sticks tumbled down on my head.

Ronni laughed aloud at me.

I glared at her.

She reached her hand up and straightened my hair. “There,” she said, “now you don't look so wild.”

I turned my head and kissed her wrist, one swift lick of the tongue, and then lowered her hand between us, not letting go. My voice lowered to a husky tone. “What do I owe you, lovely lady, for beating me at pool?” I stared at her expectantly, trying to act cool.

“Oh, I want what every girl wants.”

Her hand scorched my skin, her heat seeping through my bones, boiling my blood. Ronni burned for me.

She burst my bubble by adding in a whiny voice, “I want flowers,” and then shook her hand free of my grasp.

“Fine! I doubt any florists are open so I'm going home.”

“Well, you don't have to be such a bad sport,” she said, grinning.

“And why are you laughing?” I said to Riley.

“Because if you knew your wife better, you would know that Ronni has been a pool shark since sixth grade when she began hanging out at the pool halls while waiting to escort her grandpa home after he'd had too much to drink. Ronni was practically raised at the pool hall.” Riley turned to Ronni and kissed her on the cheek. “I've got to go. There's my date.”

Ronni spun on her heel, ran out of Lovejoys, and pulled her car out of the parking space.

I raced to my car and jumped in.

I lifted my foot from the gas pedal and slowed the car down, hiding a few cars behind her. The smile on my face was the predatory smile of the hunter.

Chapter 8

WIFE

My husband is following me and my traitorous heart beats with excitement at the chase.

We swing our cars into the garage at nearly the same time.

Aha, beat you by a yardstick, creep.

I jump out of the car and race to the door, shoving the key into the lock.

He covers my hand with his, stopping me from turning the key. He is breathing heavily, almost painfully. The hair on the top of my head creeps across my scalp and his hot breath heats my skin all the way down to my toes.

He picks me up and I'm kicking my legs and screaming. He's laughing!

Brad carries me to the car and opens the back door.

Damn, I should have locked it!

He flings me across the seat. "Quit playing hard to get," he pants. "I can smell your desire."

"No!"

"You don't mean no, Ronni. Quit being coy! You know you want it. You were giving me sex vibes when we played pool! Every night you've been touching yourself, playing with yourself all for my benefit."

"You are sick!"

His index finger crawls down the zipper of my skirt as if the little teeth are piano keys.

I sigh with relief because he does not yank at the zipper. Fine. He scared me. Now we can both go into the house and act like sober adults, a

married couple with no sex privileges.

Yipes! He yanks up my skirt.

I push my knees together, beating his chest with my fists.

He grabs my wrists, jerking them over my head.

He climbs on top of me grinding his rough, denim crotch against my panties.

Oh, God, what is happening to me? Brad feels so good.

He pants, whispering in my ear and grunting, "You're aroused when I touch you. Admit you want me, Ronni!"

I shake my head back and forth, meaning no.

But then his thumb slides in between our sweating bodies and pushes against my moist sensitive button, circling fast and...If he really touched me *there* with no clothing in between I swear I...my fists are pathetically punching him...now rubbing his chest, then encircling his neck as my head spins. A wanton desire engulfs me. Something more is happening, a heat seeping through my veins, a pulsing...*there*.

I wrap my leg around his leg and move against the crotch of his denim jeans, pushing hard, panting and sobbing as wave after wave hits me. I bite my lip, swearing not to beg him to make love to me; only it won't be making love, the act would be fucking and I can't...not with Brad...never again with Brad.

Oh, God! I long to touch him. Squeeze him. Caress him.

I grasp his shoulders, totally losing control as he pounds against my body with the lump in his pants.

Finally, my body shudders, slowly coming back to earth, limp, relaxed.

I am confused and angry at the delicious feeling. No, say what it is, orgasm. I have had my first orgasm with a partner and he is still humping against me, making me want...oh, God! Again!

Brad is still fully aroused and then he pushes hard against my panties and groans, his head slumping over my shoulder.

Well, he did not exactly rape me, he did not penetrate me, but I yell nevertheless, "Get off me, you pervert! Quit molesting me!"

"Well quit teasing me," he growls.

Am I angry with him for taking advantage of me? I have had too much to drink! Or am I mad at myself because I still want him?

He climbs off me, appearing embarrassed because he ejaculated in his pants.

Guilt seeps between my legs. I should want to please this man the way he pleased me, except he forced me, sort of. He has a rough way of seducing a woman. The first night Brad came back from Philly, he begged me to have sex, and now I understand why. Sex with a partner can be good, addictive even. No wonder he wants it so badly. *But with Barbie. Do not forget about his mistress. Quit wanting to make him feel as good as he makes Barbie feel. Do not try to prove to him that you are just as good as she is in the sack. Remember, Brad blames you because Barbie, on the rebound from their cancelled wedding, married mega-rich, old man Bubba Simpson. As consolation, Brad got stuck with you and Traci.*

Good! I have come to my senses.

I yank down my skirt and stroll nonchalantly to the door, pretending I did not slip my right foot into my left heel and vice-versa, so that I am walking like a duck. Quack! Quack! A good orgasm seems to bring out the humor in me even while mixed emotions agitate my heart. Forget my mind, his presence one-step behind erases all rational thought.

I drop my forehead against the door, hugging myself and shivering. "You don't play fair, Brad."

He scoffs and bumps my shoulder, walking quickly into the house as if to get as far away as possible.

I run upstairs to my bedroom feeling like an animal trapped by my own passion, scared to death of losing myself with him, in him, and through

him. He will hurt me, destroy me.

I slide down my bedroom wall, hugging my knees and rocking.

Stay away from me, Brad. Please stay away. Go back to Barbie where you claim you belong.

He is playing with me. Brad is up to something. How can a man change so quickly? Why is he suddenly interested in me?

Yet, I rise from the floor and slowly strip, peeling each piece of clothing off, my hair covering one eye like a sexy starlet from the 1940's.

I fall to the floor and crawl across the carpet like a snake tempting Eve in the garden of delights.

I climb on my bed like every night the past week and stroke myself, thinking of the back seat of the car and how good Brad looked in blue jeans.

I turn on my side to give him a full view because Brad is watching, always watching through the keyhole.

Don't trust him. Riley said not to trust him.

Don't let him in.

He wants to come in.

Did you lock the bedroom door?

You're playing with fire.

You're going to get burned.

Brad is going to burn you.

Yes, he's burning me up with his eyes!

Chapter 9

HUSBAND

I read the entire ebook *How to Be a Good Husband for Dummies Whose Wives Are Clueless about What Kind of Shits They Are Married to or just how Far the Cheats Will Go blah, blah, blah*, but had not yet gone online to rate the pages because if Ronni noticed my deceit, I planned to demand my .99 back.

How to Be a Good Husband for Dummies

Chapter 1 Help Out Around the House

1. Fold the clothes.
2. Take turns loading the dishwasher.
3. Carry the trash out, stuffing the bag into the dumpster.
4. Roll the dumpster out to the curb on trash day.
5. Carry the groceries from the car to the kitchen.
6. Roll your sleeves so she will admire your bulging muscles.
7. Cook breakfast. See the appendix for instructions
- ~~8. Clean the house.~~

Chapter 2 Support Her Emotionally

1. Learn to heat up Chicken Noodle soup.
2. Try not to gag when massaging her feet.
3. Don't say, "What's up, bitch?"
4. Listen, keeping your opinions to yourself.
5. Be punctual to keep her stress level down.
6. Kiss her even when you are not looking for sex.

Chapter 3 Sex If You Want More Than One Time

1. Sleep every night in your wife's bed

2. Do not demand nightly sex. Some nights just spoon her.
3. Give her pleasure and do not forget the G-spots.
4. Close your eyes if you must during sex.
5. Never wear a paper bag over your head during sex.
6. Even worse, do not place a bag over her head during sex.
7. Remember that oral sex can be a two-way street.
8. Do not force her to give you oral sex.
9. For instance, never lock her head in a wrestling move.
10. Same goes for sitting on her face.
- ~~11. Be a gentleman.~~
- ~~12. Be respectful.~~

Chapter 4 Be Romantic

1. Place a rose on her pillow, thorn-side down.
2. Have a date night every month.
3. Deliver flowers to her even when it is not her birthday.
4. Tell her she looks as young as when you first met her.
5. Tell her, even you met her in elementary school.
6. If you can remember your anniversary, buy her a card
7. Sneak up behind her and give her a wedgie.
8. Insert a little heart in your emails.
9. Shower a skinny wife with heart candies for Valentine's Day.
10. For a fat wife, cut little hearts of lettuce for Valentine's Day.
11. Act like a gentleman and hold the door open for her.
12. Do not let the door go before she is through the opening
13. Remember, hospital bills are expensive.
14. If she falls, help her up, even if you secretly tripped her.

Chapter 5 List of Don'ts

1. If she gets hurt, you may have to be her nurse.
2. Resist shoving her.
3. Do not push her down the stairs.
4. Do not kick her.
5. Do not trip her.
6. Try not to yell at her.
7. Never hit her no matter how angry she makes you.
8. Do not argue with her.
9. Learn to be a Yes man and then do what you want.
10. Never threaten her.
11. Remember that she is the weaker sex and not just her brain.
12. Keep belittling remarks to yourself.
13. Try not to be so selfish.
14. Keep your jealousy at bay.
15. Let her eat the last candy bar unless she is overweight.
16. Let her drink the last beer, unless she is overweight.
17. For a heavy wife, mix a fat-eating vinegar drink for her.
18. Never compromise.
19. Always make her *think* she is getting her way.
20. Do not make promises you cannot keep.
21. Do not be caught cheating.

CHAPTER 6 LIST OF DOS

- ~~1. If she asks, tell her where you are going even if you have to lie.~~
- ~~2. Tell her who you were with last night even if you have to lie.~~
- ~~3. Keep nothing from her even if you have to lie.~~

Chapter 7 Things to Talk About

1. Agree with her on every aspect of religion.
2. Claim to support a woman for president.
3. Laugh with her and not at her.
4. Compliment her, if you can find anything worthwhile.
5. If not, then keep your mouth shut and do not insult her.
6. Share her interests. Does she sew?
7. Does she upload videos on YouTube?
8. Social Media is a great place to collect future evidence.
9. Post loving messages on Facebook.
10. Send loving spousal Twitter tweets.
11. Post *together* photos on Instagram.
- ~~12. Do not tell blatant lies.~~
- ~~13. Earn your wife's trust by proving you are trustworthy.~~
- ~~14. Be who she thinks you are and not the real you.~~
- ~~15. Do not keep secrets from her.~~
- ~~16. Be open only about your positive feelings.~~

Epilogue

One final note: Memorize this book and then burn it, or permanently terminate the ebook, so she never finds it. Ha! Don't feel guilty about following any of the guidelines in *How to Be a Good Husband for Dummies Whose Wives Are Clueless about What Kind of Shits They Are Married to blah, blah, blah*. Even men fake it sometimes.

Chapter 10

WIFE

The Oasis Restaurant on Lake Travis sits high atop a hill surrounded by trees with multi-level decks overlooking the water. Houses around Lake Travis sell in the millions and the higher up the mansion, the richer the owner. The Queso (cheese) dip on the menu when doctored with salsa is to die for.

Exquisite stringy, cheddar cheese sticks between my teeth as lovers sigh over the setting sun reflected across ripples of water. A few tables celebrate birthdays and anniversaries. Others keep a vigil with their wristwatches and cell phones, eyeing the time and wondering how much longer before their out-of-town company goes home.

Have you ever had one of those days when you scoop a tortilla chip brimming with warm melted cheese into your mouth and a jalapeno pepper burns a hole in your stomach? Then you realize the chili pepper is vinegary and not hot at all, yet your lips burn, your belly aches, and your body goes limp like a rag doll and you slide from the chair.

Then your daughter says loudly, “Mommy, what are you doing under the table?”

Brad is not only spying, he is following me—again! It cannot be a coincidence that a server seats him at a table next to us. The restaurant is big so difficult to find a particular diner because multiple wooden decks overlap each other and covering the tables are *Cazadores Tequila* umbrellas.

“Why sweetie, I’m not hiding,” I say and laugh self-consciously. “My napkin fell under the table.”

“No, it didn’t, Mommy.”

I pump a puff of asthma inhaler into my lungs.

Brad wiggles his fingers at Traci and the little traitor yells, “Eat with us, Daddy!”

I march over to his table and poke his chest with a finger. Screw the other diners who are staring. “Why are you following us, Brad?”

“Believe me, Ronni; I didn’t know you were coming here. A patient recommended the Oasis. I looked forward to eating here all week.”

“Right, like you’ve never eaten here a thousand times.” *Tell another lie, Brad, about your patient. Is she a woman?* “Who are you meeting?”

“No one.” He smiles lazily and flirts with his eyes.

Traci hollers, “Come on, Daddy, eat with us!”

Last time Traci made a scene in public, Brad slapped her. Now he drags a chair over to our table, plops down, and kisses Traci on her cheek.

She squeals with delight.

The live music is a shit-kicker biker band, and I should have worn steel-toed boots. Barbie Simpson will show up any minute and plant her big rear at our table between Brad and Traci. Part of the plan must be that Barbie should get to know Traci because my rival will wind up Traci’s stepmother after she divorces Bubba and Brad wins custody of Traci.

Over my dead body!

I cause the scene to end all scenes—I clench my fists and scream bloody murder. Bubba Simpson will charge into the restaurant waving a gun. Everyone knows Bubba is a crazy jealous fool. I could care less if Bubba shoots Brad, but what if he misses and shoots Traci instead.

Once more, I scream.

Brad jumps from his chair, slaps his hand across my lips, and gives me a good shake. “Sit down, wife; I’m not going to bite.”

But I do bite and he yelps.

Traci’s lip trembles from holding back her tears. “Can’t you just get along?”

My face flushes with mortification. I am acting loony and low class, like Mama. I stare dejectedly at my hamburger, ketchup running down the

sides of the soggy bun. *I am ruining this evening for Traci.*

Minutes pass and neither Barbie nor Bubba show up.

My cocktail napkin has a cartoon figure of a woman leaning against a wavy wall. The words on the napkin state: I drink because I am insecure, socially unfit, and I like alcohol.

“Here, let me,” I say in a tiny voice and examine my teeth-marks on his skin. This kinder Brad may be worth a napkin to wrap his bloody thumb.

“Suck on it to stop the oozing,” he says in a suggestive manner.

I grab his drink and pour Gin on his cut, smiling as he winces from the pain. Well, alcohol is good for rabies bites.

I cringe, waiting for Brad to break the empty glass over my head. Instead, he flashes a charming grin. “Some men prefer the ones who sting them.”

I cannot help but smile back at his retort. Slowly, I begin to unwind and have a good time, even laugh at a few jokes. Odd, Brad was never this funny before. My husband has always played practical jokes at everyone else’s expense, but he never made *me* laugh. Usually, I cringe, like last month when he filled my *Facebook* page with condolences. The *Facebook* background photo was replaced by a photo of a *R.I.P.* headstone with my name on it. Seeing your death predicted, like three months from right now, today, would freak anyone out, joke or not.

I deleted the Facebook page and tweeted, *Help! My husband is trying to kill me! His name is Dr. Brad O’Boyle and he is insane!*

And my husband thinks I have no sense of humor.

I no longer use social media, thanks to Brad.

Our dinner together almost seems like a date until Brad sips his beer, a *Summer Love Extra Special Bitter*. His cell phone rings and Brad blinks at the number but does not answer. He has a guilty look on his face.

Our conversation becomes stilted and we are both uncomfortable while watching the sun drop into Lake Travis and then vanish. The world is going to be permanently dark, the sun eaten by fish.

Brad insists on paying which is a moot point since he earned every penny in my purse.

We exit the arch of the restaurant and walk a pathway lined with Christmas tree lights in May.

On the drive home, Traci falls asleep with a smile maybe because she believes the three of us have become a family. For the past week, Traci has knelt mumbling her prayers. She whispers to the air, “Thank you, God, for sending me a daddy.”

I now whisper, “Thank you, God, for reminding me of my husband’s true nature.”

The road winds down Comanche Trail. I keep an eye on the mirror until Brad hangs a left on 620.

Brad does not make a U-turn, a change of heart, and follow us home. He is going to *her*. My husband is going to grind against Barbie’s body and give her an earth-shattering orgasm.

For the first time in our marriage, I feel cheated.

Chapter 11

WIFE

Brad is *not* having a fit over Traci wearing shorts and a t-shirt to his parents' house. In the past he ordered, "Clothe the kid in a frilly dress and make sure her face is clean, no sticky candy. If Traci gets fingerprints on the car, she is going to be smacked."

"Really, Brad? Maybe we should keep our daughter in gloves so she no longer smudges your life."

"What a great idea! Get her a pair of those Mickey Mouse gloves so she'll want to keep them on." Brad always laughs at his own cruel jokes, at least he used to.

The crème-de-la-crème of Austin rule over their money from above the ripples of Lake Travis. Brad won the lottery when he was adopted as a newborn whereas I grew up at a rundown trailer park. The O'Boyles reside in a three-story red brick 7,000 square foot house. Visiting my in-laws is like having an impacted tooth yanked without anesthesia. I climb the walkway to the house feeling like a child again with the wrong tooth tied to a door handle by a drunken grandpa.

Brad's mother, Viola, sits with mint tea bags on both eyes held down by smashed grapes. She yanks the tea bags from her eyes, handing them to Ethan. "Here, make us some *Mint Julep* cocktails." She tosses the grapes at her husband. "Use 'em as garnish."

Ethan scuffles away walking like an old Japanese woman with bound feet.

He returns with a pot of acrid cocktails, smacks Brad on the back and bellows, "hello, son." Ethan is half-deaf and yells to make up for it. He grabs my hand and squeezes so hard my bones crunch. He then waves his fingers at Traci.

Viola shoves an article under my nose about the booze gene being inherited. "Your grandfather was a drunk," she informs me as if I am too dumb to remember Pops wobbling over to the sink, opening the curtain

below, and yanking out a cheap bottle of wine for breakfast. “He was a fuckin’ alcoholic,” she slurs between teeth stained red from wine.

Viola slurps her fourth before-dinner *Manhattan*. She puffs on a cigarette, dropping the ashes on pillows of rich satin and velvet. Viola distinguishes drunks by the quality of alcohol they consume, not the quantity. She considers socialites such as herself social drinkers, not alcoholics. Viola socializes six days a week with her narrow-minded friends. She cheats at mahjong while sipping *Dirty Martinis*. She sticks out her foot and trips the leading bocce player, while hiding behind a *Taj Mahal*. When she’s losing, Viola topples the dominoes with her *Pisco Sour*. She zigzags a golf cart across the golf course while guzzling a *Tinto de Verano*. Viola skips the ball across the bowling alley, splashing her *Sidecar* so that the next player falls on her rear. At the weekly luncheon with the “girls” where they gobble-gobble about their turkey necks, Viola gargles a *Clément Créole Royals*. At the country club swimming pool, she drinks a *Fuzzy Navel* while sunning in a thong, her saggy tanned skin rolling in waves across her bones.

I jerk my head back to avoid her long cigarette holder, which resembles those from old glamour movies. Viola has the look of a decrepit *Gloria Swanson* from the film *Sunset Boulevard*. The hag would love to burn my eyes out and her cigarette stalks my every move.

Brad’s father drags me from the sofa, rescuing me from *death by tobacco*. “Just sit there and get stinking drunk, Viola. I’ve something important to say to this young lady,” he hollers in a Texas twang thicker than Brad’s.

“Lady, my ass,” she slurs and glares at my mini-skirt which has a leopard pattern with claws.

I tower above my father-in-law on *yes-I-am-a-slut* stiletto heels.

“I had my colonoscopy, Veronica, and the doctor removed a polyp as big as my fist.” Ethan clenches his hand and shoves it at my face. “Can you imagine this in my butthole?”

Yes, I can. Ethan is a fruitcake. I have even seen him dancing at the Country Club with a man. He gravitates around the pastels and his dinner

jacket is white with blooming lavender flowers. His socks are pink and his slacks and loafers white. A sunny carnation is stuffed in his lapel but Ethan is anything but happy. He is a man living a lie. Really, he should just come out of the closet.

Viola makes a small circle about the size of a dime with her index finger and thumb. She points to his butt with her middle finger. She mouths, *his polyp was the size of a pimple.*

Ethan does tend to exaggerate like the time he claimed Brad was his biological son because he donated enough sperm to fill a bank.

Ethan now shoves his face closer so that he has my full attention. He bombards me with an alphabet of ailments. "I even have Zinc deficiency," he hollers.

"Well soil gets that, too. You know...dirt?"

"Dirt?! You think I could have gotten Zinc deficiency from dirt? You're in dental school. What do you know about it?"

I am descended from a long line of drinkers and usually avoid alcohol but now I reach for a *Fat Like Buddha* cocktail.

"Viola," Ethan howls, "you been shoveling dirt in my food again? You been digging up the garden drunk?"

Viola is all over Brad, raining kisses across his neck. "My boy, my sweet boy. Your Mama loves you, Braddie, more than anyone in the world!"

This is the first time I've seen Brad try to free himself from his mother's embrace. He unwraps her arms from around his waist and slides across the sofa. He tugs at his collar as if choking on his own spit. He swallows and says rather proudly, "Traci learned to ride a two-wheeler today."

"Do you ride your bicycle well, little girl, or do you fall off your seat like your clumsy mother?" Viola does not wait to watch Traci's hurt look. She burps and attacks me next. "Brad confided to me, Veronica, when you fell off your exercise bicycle and broke your wrist. Brad and I had a good laugh about that incident for a long time, didn't we, honey?" Viola chuckles

and slides across the couch shoving her hip against Brad. She strokes his arm, purring, and mussing his hair. Her eyes glitter at me as if to say, *Your husband is mine. Brad is my son. My boy will never belong to any woman but his mother.*

Ethan ruffles Traci's hair. "Your daddy learned to ride a two-wheeler when he was *four* years old. Now what do you think of that, little lady?"

Traci's puffed-out chest deflates at the comparison. She hides her face in my skirt.

This is the first time Brad has ever boasted about his daughter. "Traci has learned to ride a bigger bicycle than the bike I learned on and she rides so well I believe Traci may be a champion bike rider some day. You just wait and see. Traci will ride better than I ever did."

Viola coughs and her cigarette drops from the long holder and onto her lap. She screams from the burning and smacks the cigarette to the carpet.

Ethan stomps on the cigarette and Viola's toes, causing her to screech even louder.

My mother-in-law has mastered the art of turning any situation to her favor. "Aha, the little bicycle thing proves my theory! I have insisted that child does not take after you, Braddie. Traci is unfortunately like her mother and will grow up just as dumb."

Brad stands to his imposing height. "Ronni is my wife, *Mother.*" He spits out the word *Mother* as if the endearment is a filthy word. "Treat her with respect."

"This woman...*Veronica* trapped you by getting pregnant," she snarls.

"Surely you exaggerate, *Mother.* It takes two to impregnate."

"Now wait just a minute, son." Ethan massages his arm where I punched him in a sort of friendly manner. "Don't talk to your mother in that tone of voice."

"Oh, but she can speak to my wife impolitely and with the intent to hurt Ronni's feelings?"

“Wait, Braddie, don’t leave like this, darling,” Viola wails.

Ethan stomps his foot. “Shit, we haven’t even eaten and I’ve got them ulcers, and vertigo, and whiplash, and Xerostomia—that’s dry mouth. I need a blasted drink!” Ethan pours himself a *Mint Julep* cocktail, spitting out some of his wife’s skin. Slowly, Viola has been shedding her eyelids, the result of too much Alpha Hydroxy Acid. “This *Mint Julep* tastes like mint toothpaste!”

“There’s a *Brain Hemorrhage* I fixed for you, Ethan, right there.” Viola points to a bloody-red glass with smoking dry ice, and it is not even Halloween.

“When you learn to treat my wife with respect, *Mother*, then we’ll come back,” Brad snaps.

Viola’s mouth hangs open, a cigarette dangling from her mouth, stuck to her dry lips.

My mouth drops open and I grab onto the chair arm to stop from falling.

Traci throws herself at Brad. He lifts his daughter in his arms and she hugs his neck tightly. “You coming, Ronni?” he says.

I nod my head meekly.

Maybe something scared the crap out of Brad in Philadelphia. Perhaps the plane almost crashed and his life passed before his eyes. Or it could be that Bubba Simpson, Barbie’s hubby, finally took a shot at him, as he has threatened to. Possibly, one of Brad’s patients died from heart failure and the man was 32, the same age as Brad. My husband never had a heart for Traci or me—not until he returned from Philadelphia.

Traci falls asleep during the drive home, and Brad carries her into the house gently placing her on the bed. “She looks like a sleeping angel,” he whispers.

“Funny, that between you and me, we could make an angel.”

He runs his hand across his head, making his hair scruffy as if he just woke up. He yanks off his tie and stretches, yawning. “Well, good night,

Ronni.”

“Brad!” My panicky voice causes him to spin, and he almost falls in the hallway. “Do you believe that a couple can begin again?”

“Everyone deserves a second chance.” His hands are in his pockets and he rocks on his feet, waiting for my response.

Okay, so I started this conversation but my tongue is stuck to my throat.

His shoulders slump and he drags his feet to his bedroom.

For the first time, I leave the door wide open to my bedroom and undress, slowly and deliberately, mimicking Mama, the stripper. I hum the music to a burlesque movie because Brad is listening.

Chapter 12

HUSBAND

For the record, I am not a sex addict, but Ronni looked so seductive tonight, I squirmed at the parents, crossing my legs, adjusting my pants.

She left her bedroom door open on purpose. I closed my eyes and swallowed, listening to her undressing.

Ah, she unhooked her bra, leaving her breasts free to wiggle about. Maybe one will bounce off and roll into my bedroom.

Zip. Her skirt scraped down her rear.

My breath caught in my throat at the footsteps in the hall.

Ronni stood at the threshold of my bedroom. She touched the dimmer and lowered the light in my bedroom. She was dressed in a long-tailed shirt and spiky heels. Suddenly, she turned red. "This...this is a mistake," she softly said and turned to leave.

"No, it isn't," I groaned and spun her around. My chest rose painfully and I began to unbutton my shirt. First the cufflinks.

I ripped off her shirt and then her camisole. "You have beautiful breasts," I murmured.

She blushed.

I rubbed her back with my chest, fluttering my hands across her body, brushing her tits lightly. *Burn, Baby! Burn!*

She pushed her rear into me and groaned.

"Feel how much I want you, Ronni, and desire you to the point where I..."

She turned, wrapped her arms around my neck, and shut me up with her lips.

I placed a hand on each buttock and lifted her to my waist.

She wrapped her legs around me, shuddering. She grabbed me, causing me to groan. “Did I squeeze too hard?” she said in a breathy voice.

“No, do that again. It’s a good kind of pain. I’m almost past the point of no return,” I warned her, “so you better be serious.”

Her answer was to rub me as if wanting to start a fire.

She was glorying in her power over me and I shoved her back against the wall, pushing against her, grinding my hips, pulsing into her, throbbing, rocking, and making her feel all of me until her knees buckled.

I lowered her to the carpet and groaned, smashing my lips with hers.

To hell with the consequences! I was condemned if I took her and lost if I turned her down. This taboo was the most desirable of all. Ever since coming from Philadelphia, Ronni tortured me with her presence. She was causing me to act like a perverted teenage boy spying on her, like a peep show. I really had tried to stay away from her and not touch her. I never meant for this to actually happen but *she* came to *me* and I am not supposed to act on her invitation?

“Cum. Cum to me,” I whispered in her ear. “Join with me. Be mine.”
If only for one night. God help me, I am such a bastard!

Ronni opened her legs wide and I shoved myself into her as deep as I could go. I rode Ronni like a man possessed. Damn she felt good!

“Move,” I grunted.

“Move harder,” I panted. “Dammit. Move like you mean it.”

Ronni became a wild woman in my arms and our bodies slammed against each other.

Harder.

Harder.

Harder.

I must be a sex god and with every pound of flesh, Ronni screamed as lightning zapped the sky.

I gave one loud cry and shuddered on top of her.

Our finale was the loudest boom of thunder. God may be pissed at me for deceiving Ronni. He hurled from the sky a perfect dome of light about six feet in diameter as if short aliens landed, but then the light vanished from the window as lightning does.

“You can sleep in my bed tonight,” Ronni whispered, smiling up at me in the soft light of my room.

I fell asleep on Ronnie’s frilly virginal bed. Oddly, my conscience bothered me less though I should have felt guiltier for seducing her into having intercourse with me. Ever since flying to Austin from Philly, nightmares have plagued me, but tonight, I slept undisturbed by dark dreams.

Call me sentimental, but after tonight, I would no longer think of the sex act with Ronni by the coarse word of fucking. Yeah, we had intercourse, a higher class act.

My last thought as I drifted off to sleep was to put in a good word for myself with God. I rarely talk to The Man in the white suit but guilt ate at my guts for having sex with Ronni.

Ah, come on, God! Don’t be so pissed at me for my new carnal knowledge of Ronni. I promise not to commit the act again.

To show God I meant every word, I snuck out of Ronni’s bed around five in the morning to resist the temptation of morning hard-on, you know when that part of a man’s body wakes up first. *Yeah, we guys have a built in alarm cock.*

Chapter 13

HUSBAND

The three of us sat down like a normal happy family and ate breakfast together, scrambled eggs and pancakes. Well, anyway Traci was joyful. Ronni acted suspicious, causing my stomach to ache more than usual. This situation was giving me an ulcer.

Okay, lady, I snuck out of your room in the middle of the night for your own protection. I'm trying to do the right thing here, what I should have done since returning from Philly. I have had a pang of conscience.

"Since when can you cook?" She eyed the eggs with distrust.

"Since always." I chomp on a piece of toast, smiling smugly. A woman married a man and thought she knew everything about him.

"The last time you were near the stove, I had to put out a fire because you tried boiling hot water. Ah, but then you are a braggart, Brad, and believe you can do anything better than anyone else."

She gave me an icy smile. Ronni was spoiling for a fight because she surrendered sexually giving me all of her, well the strategic parts below her waist. Ah, saved by the cell phone ring. "Yes?" I answered loudly to shut Ronni up.

"Hi, sugar, it's me," a woman answered in a deep, sexy voice.

"You have the wrong number," I insisted.

"Why, sugar, I just wanted to thank you for this morning. It was scrumptious. Absence does make the heart grow fonder."

"This morning? I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Best phone sex you've given me, Tiger," the woman growled.

"Phone sex?!"

"What's phone sex, Daddy?" Traci rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

Ronni flung her napkin down.

I pushed the *End Call* button. “Wrong number,” I muttered.

“And I thought you changed, Brad, else I never would have...No wonder you snuck out of my room this morning, you lying cheat! And after we...” Her lower lip trembled. She was going to say—fuc...had intercourse.

Please, spare me the dramatics! Ronni had such a hurt look in her eyes I felt like cutting off my finger to remove the tight gold wedding ring. The woman had a gift for making me feel like the sneaky, tricky man I had become. My voice rose in anger at having to explain. “It was just some nut on the phone, Ronni. Don’t make a big deal out of a stupid phone call.”

She pushed her chair back from the table. “And in front of Traci, Brad, you rinse out your dirty wash?”

Now the kid looked like she was about to cry. I had little experience with children. What was I supposed to say to Traci, explain what phone sex was or say that her mother was upset because I had intercourse with her last night, and the act turned a woman into a jealous fishwife who thought she owned a man?

Ronni seized the opportunity to ball me out in whispers. “A tiger really can’t change its stripes.”

Jerk me off, floozy!

“You are a lying, cheating, conniving wolf, Brad.”

Yeah, well you are a stinking prostitute, stripper, pole-dancing slut!

“Do you think you can pull the wool over my eyes?”

“Wool?” I squeaked guiltily. “I’m innocent, Ronni. I did not have phone sex with that woman.”

Unfortunately, Ronni did not appreciate my poking fun at a United States president. She hit me. Ronni beat my back with her fists.

I stormed out of the kitchen.

The woman was impossible. She had no sense of humor.

The drive to work was torture. It was like 98 degrees with 100% humidity. Shouldn't it be raining when the humidity was 100%? My shirt stuck to my back and my balls itched with sweat. I kicked off my shoes, peeled my damp socks from my ankles, and drove barefoot with my hairy toes sliding off the wet accelerator.

Halfway to work and I was driving in just my undershirt and shorts, my soaking plaid shirt cooling my sticky hair like one of those towel heads.

If only Ronni could have slipped into a coma last night, her death would save me a lot of guilt.

I did not have phone sex with that woman.

I laughed at my own cleverness and about the wool thing, too.

Do you think you can pull the wool over my eyes?

Uh, yes, I do.

Chapter 14

HUSBAND

A bologna sandwich was kind of like my marriage, which was full of baloney or maybe marriage to Ronni was Spam, a meat part clear gel so shaky and see through. What was transparent—my so-called marriage would not end well.

My office door burst open and a peroxide blonde flung her purse back and smacked me.

Bologna flew out of my mouth. My head flung against the back of the chair, and the chair flew across the room, the wheels whining against the wooden floor.

I cupped my bleeding nose tenderly. “You could have broken my nose, you whore!”

“How dare you hang up on me, Brad O’Boyle,” she spit out. Even with a tablespoon of saliva, Barbie’s Texas twang was itchy.

“Hang up? What in tarnation are you talking about?”

“You know perfectly well I’m talking about this morning. I would have come over earlier to give you hell, but could not escape from Bubba, that fat ass. God, I wish I’d never married that pig.”

Barbie was aptly named. She resembled the *Blonds Diamond Barbie doll* with cat eyes, super-long fake feathery eyelashes, full red lips, and long white-blonde hair. She even had a hot-pink leather jacket draped across one shoulder. Barbie was a real Texas beauty queen, according to the patch on her jacket.

She cracked her gum and plumped down on my desk, jiggling her boobs. “Quit acting like you don’t recognize my girls, Brad, and take that stupid look off your face. I can recite the size and brand of your underwear. I shop for you, remember? I have even measured you. We had fun that day with the ruler. You betcha!” She blew a bubble and it popped. Barbie could chew gum and scream like a banshee at the same time without choking.

“You hung up on me after professing to love me for the rest of your life when we had phone sex this morning! And last Sunday morning instead of going to church you said you felt like ear humping me again!”

“Was my number blocked when I called you this morning to have phone sex?”

“Yes, your number was blocked but you can’t hide from me, Brad O’Boyle. I have your cell phone number, your mama’s number, and your private office number. Oh, and your mama said to call her. I had lunch with Viola yesterday. She’s still upset at you.”

She pouted at the blood dripping from my nose to my fingers and handed me a perfumed hanky. “Poor baby.”

Barbie was scarier in a purring mood than when she was beating me up with a hefty purse. She shook her hips around the desk and groped me a hard squeeze with her vampire-like fingernails.

“My balls,” I yelped and jumped from the chair.

“You have got be kidding me, Brad,” she snorted.

“I’m not in the mood to be jerked off.”

“You think I wanna give you a hand job like some hooker plying her flesh on Congress Avenue?”

“I don’t need a blow job right now.”

“I want you to screw me. I am not going to suck you like a prostitute. Give your poopsi whoopsi a slice of heaven. You know phone sex makes me hornier for you. We have not been together since the night before you went to Philly. I’m on fire for you, stud man.”

She ground her hips against me, turning me on. I shoved her away and ran for the door. “There is an endoscopic procedure scheduled in a few minutes,” I lied.

She lifted her skirt and fingered her crotchless panties, grinning like a she-cat, knowing her nasty gesture was making me squirm.

“I, uh, have a problem, Barbie.”

She raised an eyebrow that said, this better be good or I am going to beat the crap out of you, Brad O'Boyle.

"I, uh, caught something in Philly."

"What did you catch, Brad?"

"The clap."

A stapler hit me on the forehead.

There is a sharp letter opener next to the stapler! I jerked open the office door and ran for my life to the men's bathroom.

I locked the door and sat with my back to the wood, breathing heavily.

The building shook when Barbie slammed the door of the office.

I tiptoed back, ignoring daggers from Brandy's eyes who sat at the receptionist desk shredding papers.

"Bring me some ice for my nose, Brandy."

She stuck her tongue out.

A pea-shaped lump erupted on my forehead surrounded by a purplish bruise. Slowly, painfully, I removed a staple from my skin. Like most doctors, I was a baby when it came to even the most minor injury.

I tapped my fingers against the desk, playing imaginary drums like Ringo Starr. It was one of those afternoons when the moon was visible, a full moon. I lifted my throat like a wolf and warbled the lyrics to the song *Act Naturally*.

"All I have to do is act naturally. Well, I bet you I'm gonna be a big star, might win an Oscar you can never tell. The movie's gonna make me a big star, cause I can play the part so well."

Too bad for the women in my current life, there were rules set up in Philly. I was not allowed to confide in Barbie and tell her this was all a game that she and Ronni were mixed up in. I especially did not want Vanessa in on my scheme. Vanessa, the other woman who believed she was

my girlfriend, was often a jinx. She was a ditzy broad with a *Hooters* chest and owl eyes.

I should call my new best friend from the Philly conference to see how things were developing on his end. *Nah, I'll call him later.*

Instead, I popped open a bottle of champagne and toasted myself, laughing hysterically.

The clap! Barbie believed it!

It was way too easy fooling the weaker-minded sex—kudos to me.

Chapter 15

WIFE

For the Fourth of July, Brad bought sparklers and fireworks for Traci. He lit a few black snakes on the sidewalk, and as the snakes began to unwind, there was no longer any resemblance between the snakes and Brad. I am having second thoughts about my husband and judged him too harshly, punishing him unfairly this week for his past sins. Maybe, just maybe the phone sex was a wrong number.

Brad is a changed man—he strolls into the house carrying a stack of pizzas and whistling some old Beatles song about acting naturally.

“Daddy brought pizza!” Traci squeals. She wraps her arms around his legs, and the new Brad does not kick Traci for clinging to him.

He is clueless about pizza giving me heartburn, and I eat two pieces because he went to so much trouble. It is as if Brad and I are getting to know each other, newlyweds just returned from our honeymoon. We actually spent our honeymoon opening wedding gifts.

It is too cute when your husband has no idea what kind of pizza you like so he splurges on every type of pie. A spicy pepperoni shoved down my throat and Brad pulling out a chair for me like a gentleman, melts me like mozzarella.

A couple of glasses of red wine while watching Brad clean up the kitchen fries me into hot wings.

The humane Brad gives me heartburn. I am falling for my husband and there is no antacid to stop this yearning for his bed again.

And the horse he is building for Traci! Who knew that Brad is so good with wood? There is nothing sexier than a man holding a saw and wearing a tool belt. A sharp pair of scissors and a heavy hammer is such a turn on. Sawdust does make me sneeze until my nose bleeds but then few marriages are perfect.

Brad tucks Traci into bed and leans against the doorjamb of my bedroom.

I smile softly at him, invitingly.

He whispers in my ear in a husky voice, “From the moment I came from Philly, I wanted you, Ronni. I fought against passion, lust, desire, and especially my conscience. I imagined what you would feel like, silk, satin, or so rough you peel my skin off.”

I gasp, unable to catch my breath. My skin has so many nerve endings, everywhere he touches, my skin cackles as though struck by lightning.

“What do you want?” he asks.

I shake my head, not knowing how to phrase it, but my body is compelled to bang against him. *I want...I want what you gave me in the garage, the leather seat of the car sticking to my back, rough denim grinding against my panties, your bulge circling, pushing into me...causing me to...*

Brad pushes my knees open and shoves his head—*there*.

“I wondered what you’d smell like, musk or roses. Roses, my sweet,” he says in a husky voice shaking with passion.

He rubs his mouth against me—*there. There. There*. I may die from the ecstasy of *there* and spread my legs wider.

His tongue flutters against silk and I clutch his head gyrating my hips against his mouth.

Don’t stop. Please, I beg you. Please.

I try to say the words aloud but I am so hot for him I cannot speak. My heart is between my collarbones, choking me. I can understand now how people confuse sex with love. When he screwed me with his jeans on, the feeling was so good I thought I would die from the sensation. But this. This.

This makes me float up to the ceiling, my eyes drowning in a cloud of lust.

Oh, God, he is peeling off my panties and I lift my rump to aid him.

His head...his head is...between my legs and he places his lips directly on me. I never knew this existed. My body takes on a life of its own and my hips rock wildly trying to reach new heights.

I scream with passion and his tongue moves wildly against me while his finger is inside me. My hips gyrate against his head and his finger, needing to be filled...with more. More. More.

“No. No,” I moan but mean *yes, yes. Don’t stop. Please, for the love of God, do not stop!*

My fear of losing myself, surrenders completely to the pleasure he is giving me. I may faint with pleasure, as wave after wave hits me.

I grab his hair and shove myself against his lips. *More!* I lunge against him and cry out as passion sweeps me away and shudders rack my body. The most beautiful feeling I have ever experienced engulfs my entire body until I just might die from such ecstasy.

I gasp, moan, scream, and grow weak, my bones turning to liquid.

Finally, I quit shuddering.

He smashes his lips against my lips, and the sensation of tasting myself on his lips is odd.

“Thank you,” I shyly whisper into his ear. “That was...magnificent. I never felt...”

He laughs and kisses my ear. “How polite you are. And do your manners extend to birth control?”

I answer, “No,” and with stinging eyes watch as he jerks a rubber from his pocket. His hands are shaking as he slides the rubber on, from fear of getting me pregnant. We are married for heaven’s sake!

“I expect payment in like kind.” He grins, not in tune to my hurt feelings.

Brad is the last man I want another child with so just get over it! Enjoy the moment. Pleasure the man. Zip.

My touchiness turns to boldness, and I reach out and stroke Brad, causing him to groan. "I'll pay you back with interest," I purr.

And I do.

Brad must be happy with my performance because for the first time in our marriage, we spend the *entire* night together. Sleeping all night with a man is safer than a screwdriver under the pillow. It is a novelty waking up in the morning next to Brad. The sun is peeking through the blinds. I sit up and the blanket rolls off my body, which tingles with remembrance of last night.

Brad looks so young sleeping on his side with his hair mussed like a little boy. I will let him sleep a bit longer.

I tiptoe to the bathroom so as not to wake my sleeping prince.

His cell phone rings and I open the door slightly to eavesdrop.

Brad is garbling his words with choking and coughing.

I push and strain to finish my business.

The noise in the bedroom sounds as if Brad is gathering his clothes.

I quickly wipe.

There is a running on the stairs, a sliding across the carpet, and a slamming of a door.

The bedroom is empty. My husband has fled.

He could at least have said good morning.

I stretch and yawn, feeling warm all over and cozy because everything is right with the world. Brad did not snore last night and disturb my rest leaving me refreshed after great sex, like a new woman, a better marriage, and a happy future.

Mm. Maybe Brad scurried to cook breakfast. All these years married, and I never suspected that the man knows his way around an egg.

I shower, dress, and hurry to the kitchen. “Good morning, sweetheart,” I sing.

Traci is eating alone.

The black Mercedes has vanished from the garage, along with his black heart. Bastard couldn’t even say good morning, good-bye, or how about spending the day with me. Have a good day, Ronni, would have been nice.

Brad is soon forgiven, however, because four vases of roses are delivered a couple hours later with a dozen roses in each vase.

Red roses of the heart blooms from one vase.

White roses, like my bed, grow from the second vase.

Yellow roses are for sunshine.

The fourth vase is filled with black roses of the murky depths.

The note with the red roses reads, *For taking advantage of me.*

The note with the black roses reads, *For giving me what I wanted.*

The note with the yellow roses reads, *You light up my life.*

The note with the white roses reads, *Because I am sorry.*

None of the notes is signed *Love Brad* or *Lust Brad* or *Your Brad*, or *Your Husband Brad*, or just plain old *Brad*. The notes have no signature whatsoever and the name of the sender is blank, but of course, my husband sent the roses. Who else but my husband would take advantage of me or be sorry?

These are the first roses Brad has ever sent me, and I shove my nose into the murky depths of the black roses, inhaling the rosy scent. He said last night, “I wondered what you’d smell like, musk or roses? Roses, my sweet.” My eyes moisten like the dew of a rose. The sweet scent, my sweet scent according to Brad, is reminiscent of the Sleeping Beauty Sculpture

Brad bought for Traci. A quote from the fairy tale states, *And from this slumber shall you wake when true love's kiss, the spell shall break*. My face grows warm at the memory of all the pleasurable things Brad did to me last night and all the bold things I did to Brad. A couple must be in love to share such intimacies.

I tenderly fill the vases with fresh water.

“Ouch!” The thorn of a black rose scratches my thumb and I suck on it, thinking of Brad. How odd that the flowers are from the Austin airport. Brad must have been in a hurry to get to the hospital for an emergency, and phoned a flower shop at the airport by mistake. Or perhaps he’s playing golf? I don’t recall a golf course near the airport.

Brad has not been in one of his nasty moods since Philly. He once threw the lounge from the patio into the pool when I suggested he might be bipolar. Seven weeks after Philly and a month of wedded bliss has changed everything, well nearly a month if you do not count the sex phone mix-up.

There should be trust in marriage. Brad must never think I am checking up on him.

I nervously bite my lip, giggling, wondering if I dare. Thanking Brad for the roses is a good excuse to hear his voice, and I cannot wait for him to come home. He is nicer than before. Perhaps he will not scream at me about bothering him at work unless it is a true emergency.

His phone rings twice. “Brad? Brad? Are you there?”

There is heavy breathing at his end.

His phone disconnects from my phone.

I ring again and this time the phone rings until it goes dead.

After one more attempt, I give up.

My husband is a very busy man.

Only...only, the heavy breathing sounded a bit high-pitched, like a woman.

Chapter 16

WIFE

I drink a bottle of wine sipping slowly, and holding dinner in the oven, waiting for Brad.

Around 8:30, he finally slams the front door and yells, “I’m home.”

I had planned to fling myself at him but I stand there like an idiot with hands hanging limp at my sides. There is something different about my husband or perhaps too familiar—his mocking look has returned and his eyes are menacing.

Traci hugs my legs and peeks out at her father.

“*Trace* acts like she’s frightened of a rabbit jumping from hole to hole,” he snorts.

Traci runs from behind my skirts, up the stairs, into her bedroom, and slams the door.

“Don’t call her *Trace*. Her name is *Tra-ci*,” I remind him through gritted teeth.

“I named the girl myself because she looks like a trace of a human being and not like some real person. Traci is a shadow, a faded stringy kid. She must look like your family, pathetic losers.” He yanks off his tie and stares at the material as if he might strangle me with it.

I swallow a lump in my throat. After Traci’s birth, Brad stared down at her bassinet. “It’s a girl,” he had snapped, as if he should shoot me between the legs for not giving him a son.

Brad now glares with cold eyes, and my heart beats like a deer sensing danger. Brad sometimes acts crazy, but then he is a man. After a month of hot sex, I have earned the right of a wife to know, “Where have you been?”

Brad throws back his head and laughs as if he just heard the funniest joke. He must be amused at my performance in bed last night. *The sex was*

not as good for him. He wants a woman more experienced. I can do better.

Brad wipes tears of laughter from his eyes. “I was seeing about a once-in-a-lifetime deal today. How have you been the last seven weeks, Ronni?”

“Since you came back from Philadelphia? You know how I’ve been.”

Brad narrows his eyes.

“I’ve never been happier.” I smile and gulp at the same time.

Brad’s face darkens, like a man in shadows. He clenches his fists and says softly, “You think I’m a changed man?”

“Yes, for the better.”

“Well, the old Brad is back so you better get used to me!”

I am not appreciative enough. “Thanks for the roses, Brad.” I balance on my toes to kiss his cheek.

He yanks his head away and I nearly fall. He lifts an eyebrow. “So how many roses did you get?”

“Come, see for yourself.”

Roses surround the den, engulfing the room with an overwhelming scent of romance.

Brad grabs a handful of my hair and yanks.

“Ouch!”

“I don’t know if these roses are for you, Ronni.” He grins, smirking. “There is no name on the cards.”

Of course, he kids—who else would the flowers be for—Traci?

The note from the black roses had read, *For giving me what I wanted.* I blush at the remembrance. *Maybe later this evening we could...* “Brad?”

“Now what do you want, Ronni?”

“Want to...Are you going to work on Traci’s horse tonight?”

“Nope. Traci is going to have to look forward to a lifetime of walking.”

“Oh, Brad, she is going to be so disappointed.”

“No more horsy for Traci.”

“Maybe we can at least buy her a rocking horse.”

He contorts his face into an ugly mask. “Are you deaf, bitch! I said no horse for your daughter!” He strolls up the stairs. “Quit being a pain in the ass, Ronni. Leave me alone! I am dog-tired. It’s been a hard day.”

Really? Tell me about your day. Where the hell have you been? No, wait. Poor man said he was tired. Brad has a stressful job as a doctor. Maybe he was at the hospital.

I resist the urge to follow Brad and slap him for calling me a bitch. I pull the steak out of the oven and conjure up magic for supper, a special meal as a prelude to a romantic evening. A bottle of sparkling wine is just the thing to put Brad in a good mood.

The table is set for a candlelit supper and I sit there dressed in a sexy short dress, my feet in high heel sandals, and my toenails painted red from a pedicure this morning. My toenails match my wet-looking lips. I, Ronni O’Boyle, had a makeover today.

Brad is in a better mood after showering and changing his clothes. He strolls down the stairs, two at a time, whistling.

He sits on the sofa and slides open his cell phone, punching in some numbers. His voice sounds like rays of sunshine. “Hi, Mom, it’s me.”

He speaks in a low voice, soothing his mother and reassuring her of his devotion.

“Really, Mom? You want me to? Now?” He blows a kiss into the phone and then hangs up.

“Since when did you make up with your mother?”

“None of your beeswax.” He opens the door to the garage, twirling his keys.

“Brad?”

His past hateful look is back on his face, cracking me in two. Even my voice shakes as if Brad shattered my tongue. “Dinner is ready. See.”

He blows out the candles and snorts. “I’ll catch a bite later.” His eyes roll down my body, sneering. “I’m not hungry now.”

His car backs out of the driveway, and the stench of four dozen roses is nauseating. “Jekyll and Hyde,” I mutter, “Brad number one is back.” I hurl Brad’s plate, and two rare steaks slide slowly down the wall, leaving a trail of bloody marks.

Someone is crying her heart out.

“Oh, Traci, sweetie.”

My little girl is sitting on the bottom step with her head in her lap, sobbing. She mumbles in a voice filled with hiccups, “He’s back.”

The phone rings.

“Hello?” I answer in a harsh voice.

“Hello?” I say louder.

“Hello,” I yell.

Click.

I slam the phone on its cradle.

With any luck, the person will not call back. There was a heavy breathing that crept me out.

“Mommy?”

“What is it, Traci?”

“I heard a scratching at the window.”

I pat her head with a shaky hand, trying to reassure her. I tiptoe around the house, listening for noises, and double-checking the locks, and then set the alarm.

Traci kneels by her bed praying, "Please send my daddy back to me."

I lay in bed, listening for Brad, remembering all the ugly, threatening things he has said to me in the past. I jump out of bed and lock the bedroom door.

Finally, he stumbles into the house at 1:55 in the morning.

He was sober enough to disarm the alarm!

I jump out of bed and rearm the alarm. A button is marked *Police*. The cops will be here in minutes if I ever push this button. It is insane that Brad is frightening again. Just last night, we had sex and slept together. He sent me roses! I am afraid to leave my room and get the screwdriver. I was an idiot to put it back in the kitchen drawer.

At least Brad is not snoring tonight in his own room. Yet, I am disappointed that he did not at least try the doorknob to my bedroom. Stupid, stupid! Why even want such a thing when my meat is decaying on the dining room floor! I will clean up the mess in the morning. Brad so disheartened me that I just did not feel like dealing with the spoiled dinner.

I barely sleep and in the morning go downstairs to clean the kitchen and dining room. The thorn of a rose jabs my toe. My beautiful roses are scattered across the den carpet. Someone deliberately tried to destroy the flowers.

Traci is mad at her father for not working on her horse yesterday. She has never been destructive like Brad but his moods may finally be affecting her. Did Traci swing the roses around her head, fling the roses to the ground, and stomp on them?

I clean up the destroyed flowers, tears dripping down my cheeks. Only a dozen are damaged. Brad sent me flowers and said he was sorry. He deserves a second...a third chance.

Brad walks into the kitchen and pours a glass of water.

I smile brightly and sing, "Good morning, Brad. I made you breakfast."

He makes a face at the eggs and bacon, holds his stomach, and gags. “What are you all of a sudden? Betty Crocker?” He dumps the plate of food in the garbage disposal. “The smell of eggs is nauseating. You are trying to make me sick! Is that what you want? To poison me!” he hollers.

“You are crazy Brad!”

“I told you to never call me crazy! You know my real parents gave me up for adoption. Who knows if mental disease runs in my blood?”

You are welcome for breakfast, schizo.

Over the noise of eggs and bacon crunching in the garbage disposal, Brad’s car roars out of the garage.

Quit messing with my mind, Brad, and driving me insane! I clench my hands on the counter and want to scream. He is making me nuts. For seven weeks, the man eats breakfast every morning. Now he claims eggs make him ill.

Traci is hiding under the table. She is gurgling as though choking.

I wipe my mouth with a trembling hand. *I must see to Traci. Oh, God, what is Brad doing to us?*

“Why are you hiding under the table, Traci?”

Her eyes are round as saucers. Her teeth are chattering. “When is Daddy coming back?” she whispers as if Brad might hear.

“Pay no mind to your father. He has a very stressful job fixing sick people which sometimes put him in a bad mood.”

I drag her out from under the table and serve her a plate of scrambled eggs.

Traci kicks the table, her face stretched into a tight mask. She keeps repeating, “When is Daddy coming back? When is Daddy coming back? When is Daddy coming back?”

Chapter 17

WIFE

I sleep lightly, aware of my surroundings as my brain farts.

A hand crawls beneath my nightgown. “Brad,” I murmur and turn on my back.

He buries his face in my neck, working his lips up to my ear. “Ronni,” he whispers.

He lifts his leg on top of mine and I stroke his cheek. “It’s midnight. Where have you been?”

“I was working late at the hospital.”

“On a Sunday?” I murmur half-asleep even though technically it is now six in the morning on Monday.

“A doctor’s day is never done, my love.”

For that endearment, Brad deserves a fourth chance. I straddle him, yank my nightgown over my head, and flip on the lamp. “You won’t be disappointed in me.”

He grabs a handful of my hair, lowering my lips to his.

He is hurting my scalp but my voice is mum else the moment may be ruined to prove that I am not a boring lover.

“I’ve never felt anything as good as your touch,” he groans.

I remove my hand from his rock hard shaft and circle his chest with my nipples, running my tongue down his chest.

“God,” he says in a ragged voice with a tongue so thick I can barely understand him. “Ronni.” He lowers his head and sucks on my nipple right through my nightgown.

I throw off my nightgown and shove my breast in his mouth. He sucks with loud gulping noises as if I am his lifeline.

I hump against him, moaning, crying with delight at the passion this man makes me feel. I may pass out from the sensation as a warm liquid seeps between my thighs and I actually weep there. All I can think of is *him, him, him*.

Brad makes love like a desperate man, as if we parted for a month and not just a day.

I long to ask him where he went but then I might have to confess that I ransacked his closet and discovered his overnight traveling bag was gone.

Brad whispers sweet nothings in my ear, and I have my husband back. *Dr. Jekyll* has returned.

We are both sated and sleep like two spoons, at least, Brad sleeps.

I tiptoe to his room. The traveling bag is stuffed back in its corner.

The sun rises like an over-easy egg poking from a fluffy white cloud. I lay beside him, examining every line of his face, looking for any sign of *Mr. Hyde*.

He flicks his eyes open. “How long have you been watching me?” he says in a *curiosity-killed-the-cat* tone.

“You’re snoring again.”

“I, uh, am taking this new medicine. I need to get ready for work.” He throws the covers over my naked body as if the sight sickens him.

“Now what?” His voice is biting, impatient.

“I was just wondering...” I play with the sheet not wanting to look at him, fearing what I may see. “Was it, uh, good for you?”

He gathers his clothes as if the answer is in a blue shirt or khaki pants. He sits on a corner of the bed and smiles with cold eyes. “Sweetheart, you are so good that if I don’t get off your bed right now, I’ll definitely be late for work.”

“Brad?”

He turns from the doorway.

“You didn’t ask if it was good for me.”

“It was.”

“Well maybe I was faking it.”

“You weren’t.”

“Do you, uh, think some time maybe you can stop using the rubbers? It might be nice to have a baby before Traci gets much older.”

He staggers, clinging to the doorframe for support. He croaks, “No way!” He has actually turned green at the thought of having another child with me.

I yank the bed sheet over my head. Dryer tissue is toxic. I could kill myself by simply breathing if enough of the perfumed tissues were tossed into the clothes dryer—Death by Fabric Softener. If I shredded some sheets of the tissues and sprinkled the bits in Brad’s cereal, would it soften his heart? Would it help if I grab him around the waist and agitate him so that the sprinkles of softener sheets bounce against his chest?

Having a baby with me seems to be agitator enough; Brad is vomiting upstairs in his bathroom. Ah, now his shower is running and he is scrubbing my fingertips off his skin. I cuss for bringing up the subject of another child so soon. Our changed relationship is as fragile as silence or as changeable as a Jekyll and Hyde.

By the time I shower and dress, Brad is wolfing down breakfast.

“I thought the smell of eggs makes you sick.”

He holds the fork in midair, his face flushing. “I’m starving. I had a shitty supper last night. Tasted like airplane food.”

I slam a bucket on the floor next to him. “In case you need to vomit again.”

Traci shuffles into the kitchen and stares dejectedly at Brad.

He smiles.

“You’re back, Daddy!” Traci throws her arms around his neck and kisses Brad on the cheek.

He laughs uncomfortably and drags her onto his lap, tickling her.

“See, Traci, your father was overworked yesterday so he was in a bad mood.”

“Well, I won’t be working late tonight,” he adds. “I’ll be busy with Traci’s horse.”

Later, Brad is as good as his word and the hammering coming from the basement is soothing.

Viola calls and Brad stands at the bottom of the basement stairs, shaking his head no.

“Well, sweet mother-in-law, I hate to tell you (*not*) that Brad refuses to speak with you.”

“You douche-bag liar,” she screams at me. “You are nothing but a worthless, bottom-feeding leech. You...”

“Blowfish! Eat my scum!” I slam the phone down.

Brad pokes his head up from the basement stairs. “Are you alright?”

“Your mother accuses me of turning you against her. Why aren’t you speaking to her?”

“She’s too suspicious,” he mumbles.

“About what?”

“About everything.”

He is the new-and-improved Brad, my Dr. Jekyll, but more secretive than ever.

All week long, we are a happily married husband and wife.

Every night a glass of wine gives me courage. “Coming to bed, Brad?” My voice is soft and promising and Brad stumbles after me, his pants swelling, and his tongue thick, his eyes glazed with passion.

In the mornings, he nibbles my chin, waking me to love making.

Another week, he is still going into work late. “I can’t get enough of you,” he whispers in a husky voice.

With each passing day, Brad’s voice sounds more tortured as if he is heading towards his doom.

Chapter 18

HUSBAND

I was sick of flying. I traveled to Philadelphia nine weeks ago and then a few weeks ago made a fast trip, just an overnighiter to another city to meet up with my new best friend, the guy I met in Philly.

Texas pretty much had a flattop, a crew cut like a military recruit. There were no mountains to contain the wind. Even in slightly hilly Austin, wind howled through the broccoli-top trees. *Yeah, it is so windy in Texas there are cows flying about.* A mail carrier blew through the office.

Brandy barged into my office waving a package. She was looking to catch me with a female patient. Whenever an attractive woman sat in the waiting room, Brandy would look at her with a surly expression. She threw dirty fingers at the women when they were not looking. She was a married woman who was sexually frustrated because I denied her my office couch. Brandy was not part of the plan and there were already too many women in my life.

“Here’s a package for you, boss.” Brandy tossed her brown hair and her bangs fell across her eye like the old time sultry actress *Veronica Lake*.

“I see you’ve opened my mail again, Brandy.” I smiled grimly at her. It would be lovely to get rid of Brandy. She made me feel guilty, always watching my next move.

“It’s my job to be nosy for you, Doctor Boss.” She waved the package above her head. “A video from Canada, probably advertisement to buy Canadian drug samples for your patients. Shall I play it?”

I nodded my head no, but she shoved the DVD into the player any way and hit the play button.

What the bloody hell! Elvis Presley’s voice blared out from the player singing *Hawaiian Wedding Song*.

Beneath a sign that read: *I Want to Marry Elvis Wedding Chapel*, a groom, dressed as Elvis tap-danced down the aisle in a room filled with

white flowers. He wore a replica of the infamous white, rhinestone-studded jumpsuit, minus the big belly. A pair of dark shades balanced on the bridge of his nose and a blue-black Elvis wig jiggled on his head. From the current timestamp, it was August so like 130 degrees in Vegas. I could have fried an egg on the sizzling sweat on his forehead.

Brandy and I leaned closer to the screen.

He stopped at an Elvis shrine with a picture of the king meant to watch over the wedding ceremony.

An hourglass bride skipped down the aisle in a white mini dress barely skimming her bottom. Steam puffed from beneath her skirt. *Yeah, the devil lives in the heat of Vegas*; everyone knows this after watching Hollywood films featuring the devil sunning at a casino pool.

A veil cascaded down the bride's back, brushing her fake diamond-studded white satin heels. She skipped across a green-carpeted aisle, singing, "Going to the *I Want to Marry Elvis Chapel*, and gonna get married."

I recognized the bride—Vanessa!

The groom stood with his hands clasped below his flat belly, thumbs hooked in his belt, classic Elvis pose. A white cape flared out from his broad shoulders. Fake rhinestone rings circled his fingers. He removed his sunglasses and the camera took a close-up of his face.

Ohmigosh, I am so fuuuuuucked!

Brandy's eyes were like saucers. "The groom is you, Dr. O'Boyle and that's not Mrs. O'Boyle you're marrying. You committed bigamy and could go to prison. Should I start looking for a job?"

The video started playing again and I pounded my head with the remote. It was just like the klutzy bride to not wear her glasses and bump into the minister, an Elvis impersonator who moonlighted performing Elvis weddings. The minister was dressed in a copy of Elvis' infamous black outfit. Black shirt. Leather jacket with collar up. Leather pants. Black leather hat cocked saucily on his head. He looked more like one of the *Village People* than Elvis the way he shook his tight buttocks in a feminine

fashion. He even had the same perspiration marks on his crotch and underarms as Elvis.

The minister smiled to the side of his mouth like Elvis and drawled in his best Elvis voice, “Do you...”

I yanked the electrical cord from the outlet right before my bologna sandwich spewed forth from my stomach and onto my desk.

Brandy gaped at the pile of regurgitated baloney.

I ordered her to, “Leave! I will clean up this mess. Don’t breathe a word about the wedding to anyone.”

“Not even your wife?” she said, grinning.

“Shut up, Brandy, and close the door on your way out!”

She raised an eyebrow.

“Especially do not tell Ronni. Go! You can have the day off.”

The door closed behind her.

I clenched my fists longing to kill somebody! Someone was messing with me. I would need to rent a room to watch the rest of the video. I plugged the DVD player back in and hit the eject button with a shaky finger.

Frankly, I could give a crap that I was walking out on the patients. *Screw this medical practice! As far as the vomit on the desk, let it rot.*

Chapter 19

HUSBAND

Cheap tricks called for a cheap motel where men with no homes and no teeth loitered in the parking lot. The dregs of society drank from paper bags, puffing on used cigarette butts. One bum was spraying his throat with hair spray. I bought a paper sack from one wino but turned down throat spray to drink.

I had to pay an upcharge for a DVD player since the rooms came with VCRs. The motel had videotapes to rent such as *The Giant Claw* starring a monster with a face like *Big Bird* attached to his arm. Some of the other doozies were *I Bought a Vampire Motorcycle* and *Death Bed: The Bed That Eats*. Mm, that title did have possibilities.

Bigamy demanded a quart of whiskey and painkiller samples. My pockets were stuffed with samples from the office stockroom which when mixed with cheap wine could be toxic.

The sun shone through the thin windows of the room I rented for an hour. The rays heated up the sand-colored carpet. The motel was stifling hot like all inexpensive to-go rooms, but the internet was free, unlike expensive hotels. Go figure.

The A/C of the heat pump was on full blast. Why did red-district motels hang curtains longer than the air-conditioner flow? The curtains were freezing but to watch the rest of the wedding I had to slouch in my undershorts because of the stifling heat.

Every academy award potential film deserved a scratching of sweat-soaked balls and munching on throat-sticking popcorn. The motel, like in *The Bates Motel*, advertised a bag of piping hot popcorn with every room renting for \$22.99. Chopped-off shower curtains hung from nails above the windows, except where the A/C unit was.

I sipped purple wine from a plastic hotel cup, the kind normally reserved for piss during a urine drug test.

Yeah, I was a doctor who could afford a room at the Ritz, but a video starring a man who could go to prison for marrying two women without a divorce, deserved a nickel-vibrating bed. My head wobbled on my neck from the massaging mattress, wine drops joining urine stains, but not my urine stains. I already pissed myself in the office while watching the bride skip down the wedding aisle and hearing Brandy yell out the word BIGAMIST as I snuck out of the office.

The Elvis minister drummed on his big belly. “Do you, Elvis Presley, take this hot babe to be your wife?”

“I do take the hottie,” the groom belched in a botched impersonation of Elvis. “I surely do, as my one and only wife, forsaking all others, ’til death do us part.” He fished a black velvet box from his pocket and voila, the box flashed a glittering diamond wedding ring.

“And do you, missy, take Elvis to be your lawfully wedded husband?”

“I doooooooo,” Vanessa sang out.

“By the power invested in me by the state of Nevada, I pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride, Elvis.”

“Ooooh, I feel faint. Elvis has never kissed me before!”

“That’s because he’s dead, Sugah. Do not forget to sign your real name, Elvis, on the marriage certificate. Next!”

The groom moved closer to the camera. His eyes were laughing at me.

“Asshole!” I threw the popcorn at the stilled video, and the groom had his mouth frozen open. “I hope you choke on popcorn! You got married again, you stupid bigamist!” I flipped him off, pushing my middle fingers at the screen. “Suck me, man! You want to mess with my life, huh? Come on!”

I danced on bare feet like a champion boxer, punching at the groom as he placed a ring on the bride’s finger and then covered the lens with his hand.

The film went black.

A jackass of interest mailed the video from Canada.

Was I being blackmailed?

Chapter 20

WIFE

My hubby (Yes, I now think of Brad as *hubby* like old comfy shoes.) picks up the telephone on the eighth ring.

Farm-girl love shyness slams my heart against my lungs. “I, uh, got your flowers, Brad. Thanks so much for your pleasant surprise.” The roses are yellow like the color of a chicken’s beak. A large note card is clipped to a leaf, with words written, scratched off, written, scratched off, etc., until finally, the note reads, *How about going with me to the dance Saturday night, the yearly ball the doctors are having for charity?* Like the other flowers he sent, the note is unsigned.

“Uh, Saturday night sounds lovely. I’m looking forward to the dance.” Brad has never asked me to the ball and I do a little kitchen dance. *Yes! Yes!*

“Good. Good.” I can hear him swallowing and loosening his tie. He is as nervous as I am, as if we are going to my missed high school prom.

“Well...I know you are busy, so I’ll hang up now,” I offer. *Will you bring me a corsage, a flower that hugs the wrist?*

“Bye. Have a nice day,” he responds warmly.

“You, too, Brad.”

The phone clicks and I rush to buy a Cinderella dress, not a kid’s princess ball gown, but a low-cut, butt-hugging, thigh-rising, *I’ll make my husband proud*, red glittery dress Cinderella would wear if she knew how good sex is with Prince Charming. I even get a sassy new haircut.

Something wonderful will happen after the dance. Brad is going to say he really does love me and he wants us to try for a baby. We will conceive in love the boy Brad always longed for.

Really, my joy and future plans are well thought out with a clear head. Brad may have reverted to his old psycho self a while back but he has not had a relapse since then. He is a good father and no longer taunts Traci to

tears. He does not yell at her if she asks help with her homework. “That’s right, Sweetie, you’re really smart,” he says and kisses the top of her head instead of asking me, “Traci doing well in school? Is she smart at least? Did the kid inherit my brains?”

I trust Brad but Traci is always watching her father, as if waiting for him to turn into someone else. She is blameless, however, because of the couple of days here and there when Brad turned back into *Mr. Hyde* again. He had sat stiffly in his chair, diagnosing Traci’s flaws. “You should feed Traci some calories. That little girl is skinny as a flagpole. She has dishwater-blond, stringy hair. Poor kid should have inherited my handsome looks. Does she show any sign of aggressive behavior?”

No. Aggression is Brad’s territory, at least the old Brad.

“Does she show any wildness?”

Wildness is the former Brad.

Everyone deserves a fifth chance, even a waffling daddy. Traci struggles to understand that because her father is adopted, he frets over his unknown bloodline and what he may have passed on to her. Traci does not know the pain of abandonment as Brad does. She really needs to believe Brad has changed, as I do.

I even put the screwdriver that was under my pillow back in the junk drawer. I had stuffed it back under my pillow after *Mr. Hyde* returned the first time but now that man is gone for good.

Chapter 21

WIFE

My hand brushes Brad, groping for him in the darkness, unable to believe that my prince sleeps besides me. The Texas Doctors' Ball was like a fairy tale and I drift off to sleep around three a.m., reliving the dance like a favorite movie, and replaying scenes in my head.

We dance every slow dance and Brad holds me tight. I push my body closer, shoving my leg in between his. Everyone else in the room fades until we are the only couple dancing. Everything moves in slow motion. The dance has a dream-like quality. At times, when the music stops, we dance and when the music plays, we simply stand in the middle of the dance floor ignoring other dancers. We talk about everything, about nothing, about the entire world.

A scream wakes me. "Traci," I mumble to Brad.

The bed is empty on his side. There is an indentation on the pillow and a note.

I run up the stairs to where the screams are coming from—Brad's room.

Traci stands in her father's closet, her arms frozen at her sides, and screaming bloody murder.

"What's wrong, Traci?"

She rolls up in a ball and rocks. "My daddy is gone."

"Oh, Sweetheart, Daddy isn't gone. He probably just went out somewhere. Maybe he's playing golf or downstairs in the kitchen," though this is doubtful. Traci screamed so loud she would have woken the dead and Brad surely would have come running to see what is wrong with her.

Traci stands on her bare toes, reaching for the hanging clothes. She panics, sliding shirts across the wooden pole. She shoves pants, and suits crowding the clothes over to one side of the closet.

Traci runs over to the hamper in the corner and throws dirty clothes out, her eyes frantically examining each piece of clothing.

She knocks knickknacks off the shelves and looks under trophies.

“Traci, what are you doing?”

“I’m looking for the clothes daddy wore from Philadelphia, the new shirt and suit. The old suits never talk to me.”

“Don’t be silly, suits can’t talk.”

“Willard,” she says

“Who is Willard, Traci? Have you been talking to strangers?” I shake her, thinking she has ignored my warnings.

“My horsey is finished,” she explains as if this makes everything clear about why she is upset.

Traci drags me to her bedroom and points at the rocking horse with a big blue bow around the neck, a sparkling brand new wooden creation smelling of varnish and paint. My heart twists at the finished horse, and I fall in love with my husband.

Brad made the horse so sad looking. The horse is a kid’s toy for heaven’s sake, not a display for a mortuary to rock your way to the afterlife.

“I don’t want Willard. I don’t want the horse!” Traci screams and pounds her feet against the carpet.

“Calm down, Traci. Quit having a fit.”

I rock Traci on my lap in a corner chair until she is calm.

Brad’s golf bags are in his closet, so he is not playing golf. Oh, well, he will be back soon. Brad finished Traci’s horse; else, I would be peeved at him for not saying where he was going, or when he would return. His travel bag is missing just like a few weeks ago.

“You keep looking so sad, Traci, and your face is going to stay that way,” I say at the breakfast table.

Traci merely plays with her cereal.

I rip open Brad's note, which he left, on my pillow.

I am sorry for everything.

What does he mean *everything*? Is he writing about the other day when he was so cruel, or is Brad sorry for everything that happened before Philadelphia?

I analyze every word spoken between us recently and come up with nothing else for him to apologize for.

I will go crazy sitting in this house a moment longer.

I buckle Traci in the car and drive to Town Lake.

We sit on a bench watching the ducks swim.

I resist the urge to phone Brad and nag him with 20 questions.

Chapter 22

WIFE

Brad returns after supper, swinging a travel bag.

“Hi,” I say in a flippant voice, making light of his vanishing and all will be well. He needs his space especially given his dark mood. His eyebrows are down as if scowling at his thoughts. He plops his bag on the floor and gives me a frigid stare. He then shows me his back.

His footsteps creak on the stairs, the sound making me cringe. My heart caves into my back and I slump on the sofa. Now why is he so angry with me? We were dancing two nights ago, and making love.

Quick, sit up straight. He is coming down the stairs. You have been sitting slumped over for 20 minutes like a pathetic wilting flower.

Brad walks back downstairs, whistling. He is dressed to kill, so the saying goes when your husband is spiffed up as if he has a hot date. Collar up, looking cool, hair slicked back, and smelling like a French whore, *Oh De Lay Me Cologne*.

Ugliness wells up inside me, my fingernails feeling like claws. After our beautiful night at the Doctors’ Ball, I cannot help but act like a jealous shrew. “Where are you going, Brad?”

“If you must know, miss busybody, I’m going to see what Barbie’s been up to lately. Remember Barbie, my lover since high school?” Brad drools at the mouth when he says her name.

Bam! I slap him, scratching his eyelid with a fingernail.

“Cheating twat!” He shoves me against the arm of the sofa.

My hip, I am limping.

He yanks open the door to the garage, spins, and points a finger. “You don’t own me, got that, Ronni? You have never owned me. I go where I want, do what I wish and to whomever I desire. I never answer to any one so do not ever, ever ask me again where I am going. I have not interrogated

you about the last months because I do not care, nor should you. That's our arrangement, remember?"

Brad slams the door and the house shakes.

I rush to the garage and throw myself on the hood of his black Mercedes, and beg like a bleeding heart. "Don't go, Brad! Barbie doesn't care for you!"

"Get off of the car, Ronni, before you get hurt," he growls.

He revs up the engine and I jump off the car. He looks mean enough to run me over and I jump to the side fearing being smashed against the wall like a bug.

I slide down the wall, hugging my legs and moaning, watching Brad drive away to another woman, Barbie, the thorn in our marriage.

I shuffle into the house and again read the note Brad left on my pillow early this morning.

I am sorry for everything.

"I haven't asked you about the last three months because I don't care," Brad had said.

I am sorry for everything.

Rip. Rip. Rip. Until there is nothing left of his apology but pulp.

I hate you, Brad for making me want to be with you. The light is off in my closet and I rock, crying like a little girl. My heart physically hurts like at Mama's desertion when I was ten or when my little brother died the next year. I forgot how painful loss is...how a heart can beat with agony. Even though my husband is a doctor who fixes other people, Brad can never fix me because he is the one who broke me.

Traci walks into the closet and rocks beside me. "Are you okay, Mommy," she whispers.

I shake my head, yes, but my lower lip trembles, and tears rain down my face.

She takes my hand in her little palm. "I'll pray to God to please bring my daddy back home again. Please. Please. Please. That man wearing his shirt is not my daddy. That man did not carve the rocking horse. Why did *he* have to come back?"

"I don't know, Traci."

"Come with me, Mommy."

Hand in hand, we walk to her bedroom.

Traci climbs on her rocking horse, the one she claims her real daddy made her, not the man who made her mommy feel sad.

Traci rocks, claiming the horse is magic. Her daddy made her a supernatural horse so that she could ride over the mountains and across the hills to find her daddy and beg him to come home again.

I hate Brad for what he is doing to our daughter. My husband is mentally ill and needs help. His changing moods are abnormal. My best friend, Riley, pesters me to find a man who can make me happy. Riley has been married two times yet she is still looking for the fairy tale. As a child, I waited for a knight in shining armor to rescue me. Every night I cried into my pillow and prayed Mama would come back to us. My little brother died right before Christmas. I tried my best to save Johnny but I was only eleven. By the time Pops got him to the hospital, Johnny had double pneumonia. God did not save my little brother; neither did God ever send a knight to rescue me.

The only truth is that love hurts.

Chapter 23

WIFE

It is around nine the next evening when the garage door opens and Brad's car pulls in.

He is singing loudly, a Rolling Stones song, *Let's Spend the Night Together*.

My heart drops to my feet.

"I'm home," he hollers.

Traci flies down the stairs, and wraps her arms around his legs.

He swoops down like a bird of prey, picks her up, and hugs her.

I am shaking like a leaf. "Put her down, Brad. Come to mommy, Traci," and I hold out my arms to her.

"I knew you'd come back," Traci says and squeezes Brad's neck.

He unwraps her clingy arms and sets her down. Brad stares defiantly at me and reaches into a shopping bag.

I jump, expecting him to yank out a baseball bat. I grab Traci and pinch her shoulders.

He holds out a stuffed white seal to her. "I brought you a gift, sweetheart."

It appears that *nice Brad* is back, yet I take a step back as he reaches into the bag again.

Brad holds out a dozen pink roses. "For you," he says smiling with sparkly eyes.

I smack his face with the roses.

The flowers land at his feet rose petals floating to the floor.

He wipes his cheek where a thorn drew blood. "You shouldn't have done that."

I grab Traci's hand and we play tug of war with our daughter.

"I'm staying with Daddy!" Traci yanks her fingers from my grasp.

I run up the stairs to the bedroom, and slam the door.

Oh, God, would he harm Traci?

I peek out the door.

Traci and Brad walk towards her bedroom, holding hands. "I missed you, Daddy. Why doesn't Mommy like the flowers you gave her?"

"I really don't know."

"Well, I love you."

"I love you, too, Traci." Brad speaks loudly for my benefit. A lump forms in my throat. How can he be so sweet to Traci after what he did?

"Why don't I tuck you into bed, and then I can speak to your mother," he says.

"Mommy's mad at you."

"I have no idea why."

Brad is talking bullshit, unless he has memory lapses.

"Ask Mommy why she doesn't like you."

"I'm afraid to."

I tiptoe down the hallway and tremble outside Traci's door. I hide a screwdriver behind my back. I have never liked guns, especially with a child in the house. Now, I wish to have a pistol.

Traci insists Brad tell her a story. He spins a tale about a misunderstood prince who is all alone until he finds a princess to love.

"Am I that princess?"

“You are, Traci.”

“And did they live happily ever after?”

“They did.”

“Good night, Daddy,” she says in a sleepy voice and with a loud yawn.

Quick, I scurry on silent feet back to my bedroom.

He pounds his feet loudly as a warning that he is coming, and there is a reckoning between us.

I slam the door and with shaky fingers lock it.

He knocks.

“Go away!”

“Let me in, Ronni.”

“Drop dead!”

He pounds his fist against the door.

I cuff my hands to my ears. “Leave me in peace! Go away, Brad!”

He shoves at the door.

Bubba Simpson claimed Brad beat up his wife. Oh God, he is breaking in!

I run to the bed and snap my eyes shut, pretending to sleep. My senses are on full alert and I am peeking through my eyelashes. He is standing over me, rubbing his shoulder.

“We need to talk, Ronni.”

I snuffle into the pillow, cursing a show of weakness. “I can’t ever trust you again, Brad.”

Good. There. Silence. He will leave me alone now. *Ugh! Go!* The smell of his sweat mingles with whiskey, peanuts, and a killer aftershave. I want to scream at him to get out of the room but fear to pop a bottle of rage.

Beneath the blankets, I grip the screwdriver, my breath raspy. There is a picture in my head of Brad slicing Barbie's throat though this is an exaggeration since Brad used his fists, according to Bubba.

He snaps on the light so the room is no longer in half-darkness from the hall light.

Odd, Brad has no marks on his fists so maybe he did not hit his lover hard or wore gloves, if Bubba's accusations are true. I flip my back to him and wipe my eyes with the back of my hand. He must not see my tears. Brad hates weakness.

He strokes my cheek with a clammy paw.

I flinch and roll to the edge of the bed. "Don't touch me, Brad. There is something seriously wrong with you."

"I'm not...who you think I am."

"Who are you then?"

A shutter drops across his eyes, closing off any expression, any lie, and any truth. "I'm the man who's been making love to you the last few months, the man who wants to love you now, the man who needs you."

I yank my nightgown down to my toes and scramble to the corner of the bed, shivering, covering my head with my arms, and remembering Bubba's phone call.

A voice thick with a Texan bullfrog accent barked, "Is this Mrs. O'Boyle?"

"Yes."

"I'm looking for Brad."

"He's not here right now."

"I'm gonna kill him for beating up on Barbie. That dumb ox almost killed my wife! I am gonna take a shotgun and blow off your husband's head, Mrs. O'Boyle. His pecker, too. That lowlife fool..."

I hung up on Bubba Simpson.

Brad stands at the foot of my bed slack-jawed, his face the color of dead flesh. His shoulders slump and he lacks his normal confidence. "Don't look so afraid of me." He sits slowly on the bed and then stands when I squeak like a frightened rabbit. His eyes are wild looking.

"A dozen roses will not make everything alright this time!"

He licks his lips and croaks, "I am the man who loves you, Ronni." Liar! The words were dragged from his throat.

I smack his hand away. "And I'm the woman who wants a divorce. You confuse love with sex. How dare you profess to love me, after staying out all night and doing whatever it is you did! You should be in jail! I can't ever trust you again, Brad."

His eyes plead for forgiveness but he says sarcastically, "Isn't jail an exaggeration?"

The horrible names he called me. I cannot take him anymore. He ruined all of it. I was certain of my life before caring about him. Now, it hurt to look at him. "I want a divorce," I repeat in a flat voice. "Get out of my room!"

He holds up his hands.

I flinch as if expecting a blow.

He shoves his fists in his pockets. Brad paces in front of the bed. "Come to dinner with me tomorrow night so we can talk. I promise I won't touch you."

"I don't care to hear excuses. I am done with you for good, Brad. Bubba is gunning for you, and I hope he blows your dick off!"

"Well, then, you'll miss a nice meal, won't you? I have something to tell you that will clear up any confusion you may be feeling."

I chew on my lip. "The restaurant will have to be in a very public place."

"Fine, we'll go to the Warehouse District. What's your favorite restaurant?" he says as if this is a date.

“You don’t have to impress me, Brad,” I drawl, “I know you, remember?”

“You really don’t know me, Ronni, but I would like you to.”

“Oh, I know you, in every sense of the word, especially the Biblical. If you think you’re going to worm your way into my bed again after...”

“Sex is not what this is about.”

“Isn’t it?”

He shuffles to the door, and I almost laugh aloud at his rounded shoulders and back. I mostly cry.

He closes the door behind him.

I hop out of bed and snap the lock in place, snugly this time.

My doctor this morning prescribed anxiety medicine. The instructions on the container read: *Take 2 a day if you believe your husband is a maniac who might hurt you.*

I pop two pills in my mouth but still lay awake all night with my eyes wide open.

Chapter 24

WIFE

In the morning, Brad is gone. Maybe he left early for the office or snuck out of the house in the middle of the night on his way to Mexico to hide from Bubba. I suspect the worse yet brim with curiosity about our dinner plans for tonight. He was noncommittal on the subject of divorce. Knowing him, he will slick talk me and end up with everything in the divorce settlement.

Of course, Brad did not mention dinner until I brought up the subject of divorce. He begged and smiled like a buffoon.

I dress in my most conservative outfit, navy blue dress mid-calf, no jewelry except a watch. Earlier today, I signed my cell phone up for one of those tracking services. Riley is babysitting. I plan to call her about 8:10 and let her know I am on my way home.

“Do you have a reservation for Brad O’Boyle?” I ask the hostess at Truluck’s an upscale seafood restaurant.

She picks up two menus and motions me over to a table.

A glass of Pinot Noir settles my nerves.

After a second glass of wine, I order an appetizer of stone crab claws.

There are no messages on my cell phone pleading an emergency at the hospital.

I refuse a third glass of wine and order dinner.

My trout is deboned and sprinkled with nuts. The wine I drink must cause Brad’s face to appear as the head of the trout. I cut into the fish with a wicked looking knife.

I should have known he would not show. Brad blows hot, and then cold. I am such a fool.

I spit the fish out.

The waiter marches up to the table and coughs. “Is the Hot ‘n Crunchy Idaho Trout not to your liking,” he asks.

“Scrumptious but I’ve lost my appetite. May I borrow the yellow pages?”

The waiter lugs a phone book over to the table.

I flip through the yellow pages to the section on lawyers. There are hundreds of attorneys listed as divorce specialists, almost as many as those offering help to accident victims. My marriage is an accident. I should have sent Brad to prison for statutory rape instead of marrying him when I was a teenager.

I slam the phone book shut and blow my nose with a napkin. Tomorrow, I shall hunt for a divorce lawyer. Riley has divorced two husbands and she might recommend a badass divorce attorney.

The fishy smell and yucky, slimy skin of my dinner gives me a splitting headache. More wine might dull the pain but I will drink at home now that I am sober enough to drive.

I throw some bills on the table and march out of the restaurant.

I drive at a slower pace than usual.

What the...? Riley’s car is gone from the driveway.

Crap! Brad’s Mercedes is in the garage. His excuse for standing me up damn well better be good!

I scrape my car keys across his black Mercedes.

Traci is hiding behind a couch in the den, spying on her father.

I slam the door, but Brad does not hear me come in. He sits on a large pillowy chair in the den. He mutters to himself, staring at his hands with fascination, smiling as if pleased with himself.

His cold laughter makes me shudder.

Traci peeks her head out from behind the couch.

I tap a finger to my lips, motioning Traci to be quiet.

She crawls from behind the sofa and we both tiptoe up the stairs.

We stand at the top of the landing and look down.

Brad grins crazily, then grimaces and pales. He laughs and then smiles at his fists.

Traci whispers in my ear, "His smile is dark like my bedroom that time my nightlight burned out and I needed the bathroom so I peed on my blankets because monsters hide in shadows."

Chills crawl up my spine. Brad's eyes do look monstrous; his face reflecting fright, panic, and joy all intermixed with a wolfish grin.

Traci is racked with shudders. She hugs my neck tightly and her bottom lip trembles.

She runs to her father's closet, scrambling through his clothing.

"Where are they," she screeches in panic. "Ah." She points to a grey and black plaid suit. "He's left his clothes this time so daddy's coming back."

Some kids have such wild imaginations.

Traci runs to her room and hugs the white seal Brad gave her. The seal seems to comfort Traci and she stops acting weird. She rocks on her horse and watches a *Cinderella* video.

I walk slowly down the stairs, blowing the black paint from the car keys. "I waited for you, Brad."

"Brad," I yell at him.

"Huh?" He squints his eyes as if is trying to place a name to my face.

"The restaurant," I remind him.

"I have no idea what you are talking about, woman."

He does appear very confused. He is still preoccupied with his hands, opening and closing his fists. He lifts his hands to his eyes, rotating his

wrists as if searching for clues in the lines of his skin.

“I waited for you at the restaurant for dinner, remember?”

“Oh, I ate at the airport in San Francisco.”

He must have lost his mind. Maybe he is taking hard drugs and hallucinating. Brad was in Austin all day working at his office. I called his office to let him know I would be 20 minutes late to the restaurant but his receptionist said he left for the day. I was doubly shocked to arrive at the restaurant and discover he was not waiting for me. San Francisco? Not likely, not when he is sitting here in the den.

What an idiotic excuse to make for standing me up. I would demand a divorce immediately but the words stick to my throat. Brad has that crazy look in his eyes again. He is not right in the head. Tonight, in the privacy of my bedroom, I shall lay out my plans for leaving him. I will not be able to sleep otherwise.

Great, my brain is pounding. I need an entire bottle of aspirin or Xanax.

I pour a glass of water for my dry throat.

What the...A strange travel carry-on bag is on the kitchen counter with a leather luggage tag wrapped around the handle. The words *Air Canada* are embedded on the bag, and the name *Dr. Jayden Tremblay* is written on the luggage tag along with a *Victoria, British Columbia* address.

Chills crawl up my spine as I look around the room, searching for any visitors. I cock my ear to the stairs but hear only Traci’s television.

I yank the zipper open and peek inside the dark bag. The spotlight above the kitchen sink highlights a bloody kitchen knife in the bag. The knife-edge is jagged with dried blood rippling across the blade. This is a butcher’s knife used for butchering and not one of my tamer kitchen knives.

What the heck is going on?

“Ronni,” Brad calls from the den.

“Yes?”

“Leave the knife alone if you know what’s good for you.”

I zip up the bag with shaky fingers. Goosebumps erupt on my body and I rub my arms, licking my dry lips, my eyes glued to the bag. “Where did you get the knife, Brad?” *What I really want to know but am afraid to ask is whose blood is on the knife. Who is Jayden Tremblay?*

“Oh, I cut up some meat for supper,” Brad explains. “Bloodier than I thought.”

Brad claims he ate at the San Francisco airport where of course he had not been, nor is the knife the sort normally given to customers at restaurants unless you order an entire cow. I discount the silly idea that Brad traveled to San Francisco today or to Victoria, British Columbia even given the leather travel bag. Besides, some other man’s name is on the luggage tag. Perhaps Brad grabbed the bag by mistake. But...but he knows there is a bloody knife in the bag.

Don’t ask him.

Don’t believe him.

Brad has always been a pathological liar.

I feel like screaming at him. Liar! Liar! Liar! Tell the truth for once! The words stick in my throat, causing a coughing fit. I need to drink more water but the bag with the bloody knife is near the sink.

“Bring me my bag,” Brad orders. His voice is cold and calculating.

Brad stands on the middle of the stairs, towering like a black hawk. His eyes are cloudy and bloodshot as if he has not slept in awhile.

I assure him in a trembling voice that, “I didn’t touch a thing, Brad. I wouldn’t touch anything belonging to you.”

His expression is icy.

Pretend you did not notice the nametag is not his.

The secretive Brad has never liked anyone asking about his business, especially his wife.

I drop the bag at his feet. My face is an expressionless aloof look, which tells Brad I could care less about what he does, what is in the bag, where he ate supper, what he ate for dinner, or who he ate for supper or lunch or breakfast.

Nor do I dare ask why he limps or why there is a cut on his finger.

He grabs the bag and nods his head. "Good girl. Smart girl."

He limps up the stairs.

My skin is freezing where his hand brushed against me when he took the bag. How can a man who heated my body in bed now turn my veins ice cold? Where is the warm man of last night, the Brad who asked me out to a romantic dinner for two?

Right! The man never showed, leaving me to eat alone at the restaurant, crying into my lobster bisque like a fool. Brad's sickness is getting worse. Whatever is wrong with his head is affecting his memory. Perhaps he has brain cancer. A tumor can cause insanity, a growth of sheer madness.

I should pack a suitcase, take Traci, and leave this house.

I am being silly. Where will I go this time of night?

I knock on Traci's bedroom door. "Traci?"

"I'm in bed, Mommy."

"Aren't you going to say good night, sweetie? You know you aren't supposed to lock your door."

The door opens and Traci stands stone-faced.

"Feeling alright, kiddo?" I brush her hair from her eyes.

"Be careful, Mommy," she whispers.

What an odd thing for Traci to say. "I will," I reassure her because Traci appears so serious.

I tuck her into bed and tiptoe across the hall, holding my breath. Brad's door is closed and he is laughing at who knows what, perhaps the bloody knife.

Snap! Traci locks her bedroom door and so do I.

In the middle of the night, a disturbance wakes me. I fling my arms into my robe and hurry down the hallway on bare feet, thinking that Traci is having a nightmare.

I sigh with relief because the commotion is not coming from Traci's room.

I crack Brad's door.

He is thrashing about his bed. He yells out in his sleep incoherent phrases. Occasionally bits and pieces are understandable but not enough words to string together to make any sense.

He hollers, "No. No."

Brad acts as if the bogeyman is running after him.

Brad yells out in his sleep, "I will kill you, cunt!"

Then again...sometimes a man is not in a good mood if you awaken him, nightmare or not.

I tiptoe back to my room.

I'll kill you, cunt!

He has a bloody knife in a bag.

Be careful, Mommy.

I lock the bedroom door and swallow another Xanax. I take two puffs of my asthma inhaler.

I clasp my neck and swallow. My imagination is working overtime, thinking Brad nearly killed Barbie. Sure, I hate the woman, but she appeared pathetic lying in her hospital bed shriveled up in bandages. Yes, I

visited my rival at the hospital. She was so out of it; Barbie did not notice the flowers I carried were hand-me-downs from Brad shoved into a glass milk bottle. Poor Barbie, her nose is broken and both eyes are black and blue in her swollen face. She is missing her front teeth and has a bit of a Jack-O-Lantern look. Her jaw is cracked. She will need a skillful plastic surgeon.

Bubba has not pressed charges against Brad, even for assault and battery. Perhaps my husband ended their affair and Barbie is getting revenge by lying. Maybe Bubba beat her up. While she dozed, I snooped for a get-well card from my husband and there was none.

A bodyguard stood outside her hospital room. Barbie claims Brad threatened to murder her.

I set the television to mute but there is no news about a murder in Austin.

Brad is pacing restlessly in his room. Every once in awhile he curses and pounds the wall. Then, he breaks out in a Rolling Stones song, *Saint of Me*.

Maybe Brad has found religion. I certainly hope so.

Chapter 25

HUSBAND

Someone was definitely out to get me. Just like the other video of the Vegas wedding, the man in this video was a spitting image of me.

He bends over a dead woman. She is battered, her throat freshly cut.

He caresses her blouse and kisses her cold lips.

The man clutches a knife in his hands, his fingers dripping blood.

The man then lunges at the camera, grinning, sending a message.

I yanked my neck back from the screen.

I hit the pause button and moved my head closer, examining the woman, my unwanted wife, now dead wife. I screamed, “What did you do, dumb ass?”

The killer is in my kitchen splashing his shoes in a pool of blood, stabbing the dead woman repeatedly.

He holds the camera, walking backwards, filming his bloody footprints.

He then takes a selfie, flipping himself off, his eyes filled with self-hatred.

From the contortions on his face, anyone can tell that the man is insane.

I rewound the DVD, stopping at the murdered woman. I balled like a baby.

Oh, God, what had I done?

“You killed your wife, dumb ass!” I yelled at the video.

I ran to the bathroom and vomited the entire contents of my stomach. I groaned, hugging the toilet.

What had I done?

What had I done?

I wished to God I never went to Philadelphia or met my new best friend.

Oh, the web we weave when first we practice to deceive.

Who made up that creepy saying? Little Miss Muffet?

Along came a spider that sat down beside her and...sliced her throat.

Yeah, a Spidey web was spun in Philly. I was a great Spiderman fan. I even owned the costume.

I was the sort of man who liked disguises.

(In fact, let me show you right now.)

I yanked a Spiderman mask from a drawer and placed it over my head.

(There. Now you can't see my tears.)

August 27, 2015

I AM A MAGICIAN, AN ESCAPE ARTIST, BUT NOT A KILLER OF WOMEN EVEN WHEN THE WEAKER SEX DESERVES MURDER.

I am a deceiver, not a liar. Yeah, there is a difference.

To be fair, I never said that I was Brad O'Boyle. I answered to his name. I wore his clothes, even his underwear. There is no feeling like knowing a man as when your balls hang in his *Comfyballs* underwear. I healed his patients. I slept in Brad's bed. I slept with Ronni, his wife. However, at no time or in any situation, sticky or no, did I ever claim to be Brad. No one ever asked me even once, "So, are you really Brad O'Boyle?"

"Are you undoubtedly my doctor?"

"Are you truly my son?"

"Are you genuinely my daddy?"

"Are you honestly my husband?"

Not once did anyone suspect, that is how much I fooled them all, every last one of them, the wife, the kid, the parents Viola and Ethan, his patients, and Brad's staff.

Boil me, eat me, take a match and burn me but do not ever say that I deliberately misled. It was *their* perception, *their* belief.

Everyone has a double. The comparisons are tiresome. I know someone who looks exactly like you. Oh, my God, you are the spitting image of so and so! If only I had his picture, I could show you the uncanny resemblance. You are his clone!

Everyone assumed I was Brad because we are identical, down to our cock sizes. Yeah, three months ago my new best friend and I took our measurements in the men's bathroom of a Philly bar, both of us staggering over a urinal.

I could kill Brad, step into his shoes, wear his suits, steal his life, and no one would ever know he was dead.

By the way, my name is Jayden Tremblay. Yeah, the bag with the bloody knife is mine.

* * *

Part Two: What Happened in Philly

May 15th; 14 Weeks Earlier

Chapter 26

JAYDEN

Friday night before the medical conference officially began on Monday, you will never guess whom I ran into at the hotel.

Yo, Philly! I bumped into myself, my other half, the missing link, my clone, my doppelganger. Yeah, I streamed the old *Twilight Zone* series. *Di-di di-di di-di di-di*.

You are traveling through another dimension, a dimension not only of sight and sound but of mind. A journey into a wondrous land whose boundaries are that of imagination. Your next stop, the Twilight Zone!

The elevator walls were mirrored and it seemed like a fun house at a carnival because there was two of me in the mirrors. Then I realized the other reflection was another man when he brushed his black hair back from my face, yo, *his* face. Our hairstyles were identical, our complexions an unblemished natural tan. We both even had sexy stubble.

We both removed our aviator sunglasses, the same brand and style. We had the same cynical expression and a devil-may-care sparkle in our ice-blue eyes. We said simultaneously, “I like to wear aviator glasses when I fly.” We smiled slightly, identical dimples digging into our cheeks.

We circled each other like two wrestlers. The resemblance was bone chilling, a *Twilight Zone* moment straight out of the Sixth Dimension or the Sixth Dementia, which is how our cat and mouse game ultimately ended.

“This is surreal,” I said.

He slapped his business card in my hand. *Dr. Brad O’Boyle, MD, Family Medicine.*

“This is unbelievable.” I took out my business card. *Dr. Jayden Tremblay, MD, Family Medicine.*

His office address was Austin, Texas, USofA and mine Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.

The elevator stopped and we both got off on the 14th floor.

"I always ask for a room on the 14th," he said. "It's my birthday."

"Me, too!"

"You're messing with me, right?"

I yanked out my driver's license and showed him that I was born on November 14, 1985.

"You have my exact birthday," he said and pulled out his license.

"Look, we should meet for a drink. This is too much..."

"Of a coincidence." He finished my sentence.

"Yeah, I mean, chills crawl up my spine. Looking at you, is..."

"Like looking at a mirror. I can't take my eyes off you, you're so handsome," he said, grinning.

We exchanged room numbers and each grabbed our suitcases. We each had the other's bag because our luggage was identical brands, two shiny maroon suitcases with spinner wheels and navy blue, nautical carry-on bags. Leopard skins encased our tablets.

We exchanged bags, laughing uncomfortably. "Pretty weird, huh?" I said.

"I'll see you at the bar in half an hour, Jayden?" He made a left fist before holding out his hand to me.

We both were missing a knuckle on our left hand ring fingers. However, he wore a wedding band.

"You're not married," Brad said.

I nodded my head, no.

"Lucky you. I wish there was a way I could get rid of my wife, if only for a little while."

Of course, he had to be joking.

Chapter 27

BRAD

Jayden and I plop down on a couple of bar stools at the hotel and order an *AMF*, which is a potent mix of vodka, rum, gin, tequila, and Curacao, blue as the ocean of a Caribbean vacation. The drink is our favorite, at least my favorite. I am unsure whether this guy who looks exactly like me is pulling my leg.

This hotel is a fleabag. You would think the medical conference could do better. Jayden keeps his mouth shut when I rant about the hotel not having a masseuse on call 24 hours a day. And what if I want a manicure in the middle of the night? I hate frickin' dirt under my nails.

Jayden thinks we are exactly alike, but he had a public education, having been raised by a country veterinarian and housewife, probably a woman who sleeps in curlers and drags her slippers around a farmhouse with cat hair clinging to her shoes. He is Canadian, for crying out loud! Those people still suck up to the British queen, that old granny. The only culture in Canada is French Quebec. Frenchies know their wines. Other Canadians just want to be British but speak with American accents.

Big deal, so we both played basketball, baseball, football and soccer at the same ages, but then so do most boys. I, however, never wore a bicycle helmet with full-face guard and ran across a lawn carrying a stick with a net on it like badminton. I would respect Jayden more if he told me he was a cannibal instead of a Lacrosse player.

It is bizarre we are both missing a knuckle from having cracked our hands when we were walking our dog Toby and a cat ran out of the bushes. We both named our dog the same and chose beagles, and broke our hands on the same day in the same year.

It gets even stranger between this Jayden guy and me. We both broke our foot playing baseball, sliding into home base, on the same date and at the same age. We both broke a rib falling down the stairs when we were 13, on the same date.

I coolly sip my *AMF* like secret agent *Brad Bond*, hiding the fact that our similarities are freaking me out. I saw the movie *Face/Off*, and maybe someone copied my pretty face and put it on this man. My looks can kill and I can see an entire army of Brad O'Boyle's.

Anyway, this man is already boring me. Just to get rid of him, I agree to a zygoty test to see if there is a biological reason for appearing on the outside like clones.

"Hey! I can swab my own cheek," he says.

I really was not going to jam the cotton-on-a-stick down his throat even though it is irritating that he looks like me.

We rub the inside surfaces of our mouths and remove cells from our cheeks and gums via saliva.

Gung ho Jayden scans his tablet and discovers a 24-hour DNA clinic to do the test. What is even more science fiction is that the clinic is located around the corner from the hotel.

He shakes the spit-filled plastic bags at me. "One other thing, I was adopted."

"Me, too," I add and squeeze his arm in sympathy.

Jayden plans to put a rush on our DNA tests. "Wait up with me for the results," he says all excited.

"I'm about to pass out, Sherlock, and need to crash." Jesus, I thought he would suggest climbing in bed with me to see if we both snore.

He skips on his merry way to the lab.

There really is no use going to bed so as a wake-me-up I snort cocaine in the privacy of my room using a fifty-dollar bill. BECAUSE I CAN! MY PARENTS ARE RICH! However, Mom and Dad could never buy me an identical twin brother since humans are no longer for sale in the free world else I would own an army of slaves.

It matters not if Jayden is my identical twin or our resemblance is an eerie coincidence. My head is spinning with relentless opportunities to use

our likeness to my advantage.

Chapter 28

JAYDEN

The zygoty test confirmed we shared the exact DNA. It is only possible for identical twins to have dead ringer DNA. Our hereditary makeup proved absolutely that we were carbon copies in every way, down to our last gene locus. As fate would have it, we have both discovered a long lost, unknown brother in Philadelphia, City of Brotherly Love, which was poetic.

Brad insisted my balls were not as big as his were because of the independence a military boarding school gave him, which he attended from first grade thru junior college. My parents smothered me with kindness, puppies, and love while Brad learned to be a sharp shooter. He chuckled when my mother called to see if I arrived in Philadelphia safely.

“The biggest difference between our lifestyles is that I am married and have a kid yoked around my neck,” he said at supper. We both cut into our steaks in the same manner, stabbing a piece of rare-cooked, bloody meat and then slicing in similar fashion.

“I read about twin brothers separated at birth who both wed women with the same name,” I pointed out.

He threw his steak knife down and it bounced off my plate, nearly stabbing me. “But you’re single, man. This proves I should not be married! Our stars were knocked out of alignment then by a teenage tease named Ronni.”

“Your wife?”

Brad twirled his wedding ring and then removed the band, shoving it in his pocket. “A piece of trash took advantage of my broken heart.”

“You sound like you really hate your wife. Why not divorce her?”

He poked his finger on the table, lecturing on *Marriage 101*. “A woman thinks she owns you once she gives you a kid. *Oh, childbirth is so hard. My figure is ruined. I went to hell and back for you!* Ronni’s fingers

pinch my wallet, and we have no prenup. You're lucky, dude, to not have a wife."

Brad did not act married. He got fresh with the cocktail waitress, and she smacked his hand from her butt. "Twat," he snarled under his breath.

She smiled at me and Brad slammed his glass on the table, breaking it. The waitress walked away, shaking her rear, seemingly for my benefit. "See, even though my ring is hid, she notices the aura of marriage around me so flirts with you instead."

"She probably saw you take your ring off. Oh wait; there is a gaseous ring around you. Did you just fart, bro?"

He stared into his *AMF*, as if he was drowning.

Seriously, to see my brother so unhappily married, well, it was as if our heartstrings were joined. We shared a connection unknown to the majority of the human race. We had earlier spent the day with an arm around each other's shoulder as we took a historic tour of Philly. We now continued our party in his room and stripped. Brad actually played a stripping song on his iPod and stripped like a professional whereas I was always a bit shy in the gym locker room.

We both wore the same style underwear! Our Scandinavian underwear was so scandalous; the U.S. banned the shorts. We twirled our *Comfyballs* undershorts around our heads and strutted around the room in our birthday suits.

We puffed out our chests, acting like gorillas, displaying the same pattern of chest hair.

We stood rubbing our butt cheeks together and were both six-foot-one of towering male beauty, resembling twin statues of Michelangelo's *Michael*.

We stood on bath scales, giggling like schoolgirls. We weighed 185.1 pounds of taut muscle. Our shape was still identical even given our age. Some men over 30 had beer guts, not us.

We ordered room service and doled out the same portions of each type of food. We even left the same amount of leftovers on our plates. On our foils of butter, the smudges of unused butter were duplicates.

I surfed the internet and discovered studies where identical twins separated at birth often chose the same profession. In addition, some sets of twins even had the same scar on the same location of their bodies, which they got at the same age doing the same thing, such as falling down the stairs. Ditto for all our other similarities, including the butter spread.

To experience having a clone (identical twins are nature's clones) was like science fiction. To celebrate, we both got roaring drunk, running around naked in Brad's room and screaming, "I have a brother who is the coolest on the planet!"

We both passed out and I woke in the middle of the night, lying naked beside Brad. No, we did not have sex. We are both a bit wild but not into anything kinky. Besides, we are both heterosexuals. We just like to have fun and were a bit immature. Any male whoever belonged to a fraternity would understand.

I tiptoed to Brad's bathroom and closed the door so my tinkling the toilet bowl would not disturb his sleep. I snooped, feeling smug that we used the same brands of shaving cream, toothpaste, mouthwash, aftershave, etc. It seemed neither of us liked the hotel brands and were both picky.

In the morning, we both sat wrapped in towels, sipping our coffee cold.

This was way too neat—we both used to ride Harleys until we crashed, on the same date, and broke our right foot. We then each bought a black Mercedes Benz and named it the *Darth Vader Death Star*.

Brad smiled lazily. "You should take a shower in my room," he said.

I boiled in a hot shower, soaping my body with the same masculine soap I have always used. However, the bar was Brad's soap.

The shower curtain slid open and Brad climbed in behind me, washing my back with a sponge. Brad was somewhat creepy and the way he scrubbed me down seemed a bit jealous, not in an envious way, but in a

possessive *I am his* way. I swear if that cocktail waitress from last night flirted with me now, Brad would clutch her wrist, and twist her arm until her bones cracked.

Brad slapped my butt in a guy way. “I scrub your back, brother, you scrub mine. Always remember I’ve got your back,” he said which made me feel relieved. For a minute there, Brad worried me, but I always wanted a sibling, especially a brother. To have an identical twin was like living on another planet, especially having a twin like Brad. I thought I was a wild and crazy guy but Brad was more insane, you know like those *Saturday Night Live* sketches. *Yeah, Brad and I streamed a few episodes, mimicking the loony Czech brothers, only we were naked when we did so, wiggling our peckers along with our necks and chests.* “We are two wild and craaaaaazy guys.” What a riot!

At this moment, I would do anything Brad asked of me, as long as it did not concern anything gay.

We made plans to play hooky from the medical conference and hang out. We only just found each other and have 32 years to make up for our biological mother cruelly separating us. If my adoptive mother had not been such a loving woman, I would probably be scarred for life. Unlike Brad, I was not shipped off to boarding school by cold parents who did not want me around. Surely there were plenty of private schools in Austin Brad could have attended.

When Brad mentioned his rich adoptive parents, his eyes appeared frigid. His adopted last name was Irish and mine French. We speculated as to our ethnicity, but as God stated in the Old Testament, “I am that I am.” We are who we are and screw the woman who gave birth to us. Brad called her a tramp, which made me feel uncomfortable. My heart squeezed at the thought of her, but no way would I ever try to find our biological mother. One, she did not want me. Two, she split us up. Brad would like to punch her in the stomach for not ordering that we be adopted together.

“Our mother is a selfish broad,” he snarled. His violent nature maybe came from his military school training. We were built alike but Brad stood so much straighter as if at attention, his eyes scanning the hotel for enemies.

Chapter 29

BRAD

We partied hard all week like frat boys, trying to make up for what we missed not growing up together.

The 27-ton statue of William Penn on top of City Hall was due for cleaning so scaffolding was in place. We climbed the scaffold steps and urinated on William Penn's enormous bronze shoes. The cops nearly caught us. We were both running while pulling up our pants and laughing so hard, we nearly wet our underwear.

At Longwood Gardens, we ran through the Lily Pond naked.

We threw water balloons from the top level of a double-decker bus.

We laughed, drank, and whored our way through the City of Brotherly Love. There were even orgies in our rooms. It was like *if you want my body and you think I'm sexy, come on, sugar, let me know*. We actually sang that song to three naked girls in Jayden's bed.

I never really had a best friend but now my brother and I are both hung over at the Philly airport waiting for departing flights, mine to Austin and his flight to Victoria. "Ugh! My head is splitting," I mumble.

Jayden has a headache from some Vanessa chick. A selfie video she sent on his cell phone irritates him, but her cute laugh makes me hard. Then she breaks out in song and my tool goes soft. Jayden hits the *end* button, shutting her up. "Vanessa claims that I am immature. She should talk. She acts like a dumb Disney princess singing her way through life."

"Which princess, dude? Cinderella? Jasmine? Ariel? Snow White? Mulan? Let's see, who else? Pocahontas?"

"Bro, that's kind of gay." He moves his stool further away.

I resist the urge to fling my glass at him. "I have a six-year old daughter, numbnuts."

“Oh, I forgot that I have a niece. Vanessa sings her sentences sometimes, like in *the hills are alive with the sound of music* but off-key.” Jayden gives a deep sigh and orders another *AMF*. “I would like to break up with her, but I have problems with personal confrontation probably because my folks never raised their voices in anger.”

“I can easily ditch any hot babe. I am the break up artist. What if there is a way I can break up with Vanessa for you?”

“Keep talking.”

“Let’s change our flights to spend more time together and sit beside each other on the planes. We can plan what to do about a problem named Vanessa.”

By the time our plane lands in Boston, I am ready to lay out my scheme.

Chapter 30

JAYDEN

The Boston airport had some kick-ass bars. The Irish really know how to drink. We were both sloshed during our two-hour layover from drinking at a high altitude on the flight from Philly to Boston. We nursed a couple of beers trying not to fall off the high stools at the *Legal C Bar* at Logan International Airport.

“So, what’s Vanessa like?” Brad asked.

“Vanessa Rathburn, sexy blonde with a high-pitched giggle that grates on your nerves after a week. We have purely a sexual arrangement although Vanessa would like more. She is persistent in believing that we are a couple. She lasted longer than I expected but then Vanessa does have a great body. I have been trying to break it off with her for a month now. She invited me to meet her parents this week, but the medical conference came in handy as an excuse. I should have confessed to never wanting to see her again, but I have always run instead of confront. My stomach gets tied up in knots so I lie rather than tell the truth or chicken out and keep quiet.”

Brad pulled off his wedding ring and dropped the gold band on a bread and butter plate. “Ronni will be clueless if we switch places.” He pushed his wedding ring at me.

Did my identical twin brother just offer me his wife? “Switch places? You mean pretend to be each other. Are you messing with me, bro?”

“How else do you expect me to break up with your girlfriend except to pose as Jayden Tremblay?”

“You have a wife, Brad.” I pushed the ring back.

“Don’t worry about Ronni, dude.” He slid the plate back to my side of the table. “Our impersonation will fool everyone. We prefer the same wine and whiskey. We even order the same food, etcetera, and etcetera. We can trade patients with no one the wiser. Come on, man, it will be a riot. Very few people can ever have the experience of changing lives with someone

else and actually becoming that person. It will only be for a couple of weeks and then we change back and no one will ever find out.”

I could never fool friends, neighbors, or family on Halloween. I flunked acting class in college. “What about your parents?” I said.

Brad was silent, his face annoyed.

“Oh, I forgot, your parents sent you to boarding school from the time you were six.”

“It’s true Viola and Ethan never missed me when I was at school,” he coolly countered. “They would never notice our deception. What about your folks?”

“You might fool them.”

“Might fool them?”

“You have a bit of a Texas twang, Brad.”

“I can speak like a Canadian. You sound just like Americans. God save the Queen!”

“Ha-ha, you sounded British. Just talk like a normal American with no accent.”

He spoke without a Texas accent. “Now your turn,” he said.

After a few sentences, I copied Brad’s accent perfectly.

“My parents will laugh when I later confess what we’ve done,” he said.

“Yeah, we’ll play a real practical joke on our loved ones,” I said with sarcasm. I should be having a twinge of guilt, but am not really taking this conversation seriously.

“Loved ones?” He raised an eyebrow.

“Sorry, I forgot about your dreaded wife.”

Brad had been married nearly seven years, a record these days. He had a six-year old daughter for Christ’s sake, a strong bond between

husband and wife yet one of his other reasons for trading places was, “I’ve always wanted to live in Canada. You said you always wanted to live in the States.”

He was tempting, like the devil begging me to commit adultery with my brother’s wife. *Whoa, hold on, Brad could not possibly mean that I should have sex with his wife.* The way Brad spoke about, what’s-her-name, Lonni, Bonnie, whatever, she was a demanding dragon.

He grabbed his wallet and yanked out his wife’s picture. She seemed so tired and worn out in the photo. How did Brad ever hook up with her?

“Ronni screws around on me,” he said, sounding hurt.

Spare me from ever taking the plunge into the cesspool of marriage. Brad eyed every woman who walked into the bar as if he was a hungry wolf, like a married man, like a husband who has not been laid in a year. Yeah, Brad really looked like he needed a vacation from his wife.

“Come on, man, we’re like matching bookends. This will make up for all the birthday presents you never sent me, Jayden.”

“I don’t think so, Brad.” Maybe...if there was no wife in the picture.

“Just think, dude, it will be like a vacation from ourselves. We will switch for just two weeks, nothing permanent, of course. Think of it as twisted lives. Vice-versa. Flip-flop. Then we go back to being ourselves. Flop-flip. No one will ever know the difference. We’ll have a big laugh over the masquerade, like all the Halloweens we missed out on.”

“Thanks but no thanks. I’ll pass on switching lives.” *And being married, if only for two weeks.*

Brad sulked into his wine glass for several minutes, and then he slapped my back, rubbing my shoulder. “I feel like I’ve known you all my life, Jayden, as if you were right there when I broke my ribs. You are my missing rib, you know sort of like God took my rib to create you.”

Or vice-versa, I thought, wondering which of us was older, not that it mattered. There had always been a piece of me missing. It took two of us to feel whole for the first time in our lives.

“Trading identities will be like a prank we never got to play since we were robbed of growing up together,” he added.

I chewed my lip, picturing the idea of *sitting across the dinner table from his wife, a sister-in-law who was a complete stranger, a fallen woman, an unattractive female.*

He lifted his glass in a toast. “I love you so much, Jayden, I’m offering you a once-in-a-lifetime deal a man can’t buy at any price.”

I laughed uncomfortably and scratched my neck. “Yeah, right. Is it hot in here or is it just me?”

“It’s you, old man. I will let you in on a secret, Jayden. I would love to lie back in a full-body machine, an *Identical Machine* alongside of me, and watch Brad 2 come to life. Then, I could run off and play while Brad 2 listens to Ronni nag.” Brad’s voice went up in pitch and he mimicked his wife. “Why don’t you make time for Traci and take her to the park, and push her on the swings? Quit acting mean all the time!” He then lowered his voice. “Take responsibility for once in your life, Ronni. For crying out loud, I do not have time to play with a daughter; the girl is your job. You know how stressful my job is. I am responsible for life and death, for breath. I am like God.” Brad threw back his head and guzzled the rest of his wine.

“So what? I’m supposed to trade places, be *you*, and let your wife nag *me*?”

He shrugged his shoulders and laughed self-consciously. “I’m just letting off some steam. Ronni leaves me alone. We sort of live separate lives.”

“Separate lives, huh? So you don’t sleep together?”

“With that frigid broad?” He snorted.

“You said she screwed around.”

“Except with me. Ronni would not expect sex from you posing as me. Oh, I see, you were thinking about banging my wife?” His eyes narrowed in a possessive way. Brad may not love his wife but she was his property.

“Of course I’d never sleep with your wife. You are my brother. She is my sister-in-law. Do you think me an animal?”

He lifted his glass. “Salud! You are me, Jayden, you lucky devil, so yes; you are a hound dog as this past week has proved.” He tapped his finger against the table to stress his point. “You and I are the same. No one will unmask us, especially a dumb-sounding broad like Vanessa. I promise, when you come back to Canada, things will have changed between you two.”

Ah, to be rid of Vanessa. The idea of passing as Brad was intriguing. The switch would be ironic because my brother would spend the next two weeks running away from the man-hungry Vanessa, but at least she looked a helluva lot better than Brad's wife who, thank goodness, did not sleep with Brad.

I grinned and toasted to our misadventure.

On the flight to New York City, our heads were together for most of the trip, hiding behind water bottles, catching up on each other’s past lives, every memory we could ever recall, not so we wouldn’t get caught in our deception, but because we were really interested in how the other half of us lived. We were so engrossed in each other neither noticed the flight attendants until one stuck her rear in Brad’s face when she helped the man across the aisle.

Brad proposed she share a quickie with him and his brother. Brad offered to drag her into the bathroom with us so we could ravage her. How would she like to double the fun like an ancient chewing gum commercial? I about choked on my drink, especially when the woman purred as if interested. She even half-turned and sort of raised her tail so we could get a whiff.

Yeah, we had a few orgies this past week, but on a plane with a flight attendant, in a crummy little bathroom, the three of us jammed into the toilet? “No, my brother is kidding,” I hastily said, imagining the plane wrecking and us three naked in the bathroom, along with a snapped photo that goes viral on the internet. *My God, would Brad ask his wife if she would like to sleep between us?*

“Remember, Ronni is your wife for the next two weeks.” Brad said this as if he was saying, *Take her. You can have her.* We now sat at a bar at Kennedy Airport in New York City, reminiscing about the past week and how crazy fun our time together had been. We were practically crying into our beers.

My flight to Victoria, I mean Brad’s flight was announced. We exchanged bags and identifications, hugged, and wished each other luck. We planned our masquerade down to the smallest detail. We exchanged maps on how to get to each other’s homes and offices. We passed information on surrounding businesses, hospitals, favorite restaurants, etc. We discussed parents, friends, and co-workers. All the maps we retrieved from the internet and saved to our tablets. We exchanged keys, driver’s licenses, cell phones, and wallets.

Brad grinned and said, “Don’t be nervous. Everything will go as planned. For a hangover, the Germans eat raw herring with onions and a pickle. Or you could chew the dried penis of a bull like the Sicilians do.”

“Thanks for the image of a bull shoving its phallus in my mouth.”

He laughed and took my bag complaining about it being heavy. “The old switcheroo will work. Trust me,” he said, winking. “I really love you, brother for doing this.”

“Yeah, same here,” I said, but meant the love part, not the favor part.

“I love you so much that you have my permission to sleep with my wife,” he said laughing but his eyes were cold.

“I would never have sex with your wife, Brad.”

“That’s right. Good man! We respect each other’s property.” He rubbed my back, like a creepy jokester.

Was it too late to change my mind?

Brad was already walking in the opposite direction.

Oh, well, the deceit was just for two weeks.

I walked with slouched shoulders, my face hid beneath a baseball cap purchased at the airport so I could get into a sneaky mood.

I boarded the plane and wrote on a prescription pad that had the name *Dr. Brad O'Boyle* embossed on top.

Note: Remember, I am supposed to be the kid's daddy.

My stomach twisted in knots at the thought of acting like a father. I did not even know how to be an uncle. The thought of assuming Brad's identity *ever* working ravaged my stomach. I was paying for a miniature of whiskey with another man's credit card, which was a crime. Posing as a different doctor could lose me my medical license. The worst part about impersonating my brother was living with his wife. Judging by her picture, she was a woman with the sex appeal of a suckerfish. To have to look at that face over breakfast, well playing her husband was going to be hard duty, like scrubbing toilets.

His wife attending college and her blooming independence embarrassed Brad. It was a shame that my brother with his first-class upbringing hooked up with such a low-class woman. We were maybe hypocrites because our real mother likely never married our father, whoever the man was. Hell, maybe she had no idea who our real father was.

Brad spoke harshly about his wife and his resentment of her. His dislike had been palpable, but his unhappiness was no excuse for offering his wedding ring to me with an attitude as if he could hardly wait to get rid of her. Brad had two heavy pieces of baggage, a wife and kid, yet he suggested we change lives, on a lark. Brad did not respect his family but I vowed to. (Okay, posing as Brad was dishonorable, so shoot me.)

I refused to think of my brother's wife by her name, which I could not remember anyway. A first-name basis seemed too intimate, especially while pretending to be her husband. I practiced, "Good evening, Mrs. O'Boyle. We're going to have a bumpy ride." The *bumpy* was inspired by the plane ride.

During tornado season, a storm could mix a Bloody Mary to perfection. Statistically speaking, drunks usually came out of accidents without a scratch. If the plane crashed on the way to Austin, I vowed to

walk away from the burning rubble like the Terminator; my arms bulged into muscles. *I work out! I work out!* With miniature wine bottles clutched in each hand, nine reps would do it, baby.

After the sixth miniature whiskey, my eyesight improved to x-ray vision. *Oh, yeah, I can see the flight attendant's panties.* I grabbed Cookie's hips (Every plane has a flight attendant named Cookie, right?) and shoved her onto my lap.

"Any time you want a lap dance, Doctor Big, I am pleased to oblige," she whispered, "only not in front of 200 passengers."

She actually scribbled her phone number on a cocktail napkin while the flimsy paper was lodged deep in my pocket. She jiggled a pointy pen around the nutsack, but alcohol was like a vegetable home remedy when poured on an open sore. Mix the alcohol with a celery stick, olive, and pearly onion to dull the pain—Dr. Tremblay's prescription.

"Be careful on the way home," Cookie whispered while pouring a Vodka miniature down my throat.

A few drinks tucked below the belt would help me face what's-her-name. I needed to get drunk to fool Brad's wife. Besides, Alcohol was a liquid grain and like vegetables, might be healthy.

Bonus: the sugar in alcohol made booze an energized food item, except for the morning after, when you felt as if you were dying.

Alcohol was both a life and death product—even the California liberals could not say that about vegetables, except for the hottest chili on the planet, the Ghost Pepper which had burnt holes in intestinal tracts. Ghost Pepper was the devil's diet.

Yeah, the devil was a vegetarian.

I sipped my veggie drink while reading the ebook *How to Be a Good Husband for Dummies Whose Wives Are Clueless blah, blah, blah.*

I looked at my watch and the date, May 23rd. The masquerade would only be until June 6.

I yanked out Brad's wallet and made a face at his wife's picture, a woman so forgettable that I could not remember her name. I said to the photo, "Good evening, Mrs. O'Boyle. Get lost, Mrs. O'Boyle."

August 27, 2015

A CRAZY JEALOUS MAN LEFT BLOODY FOOTPRINTS LEADING TO MY MASTER BEDROOM and enough DNA evidence to hang me, along with a murder video. The police claim I am the star of murder shot by a camera on a tripod. I'm facing down *officer big boobs* and *detective pencil dick*. I did not kill that woman! These two numbskulls do not believe me that my chemistry is getting in the way of my innocence.

Oh, the web we weave when first we practice to deceive. Breathes there the man with soul so dead.

Who said that, Sir Walter Scott? Or was it Brad O'Boyle and Jayden Tremblay?

My brother and I are both broken. Our mother conceived us and then cracked us in two.

Jayden and Brad sat on a wall.

Jayden and Brad had a great fall.

All the king's horses and all the king's men

Could never put Jayden and Brad together again.

Thou shalt not murder, not even for a broken promise.

Can you believe *killing* is only Commandment Number Six on God's playlist? The first three commandments are all about Him. Do not worship anyone else but Him. Do not paint or sculpt anyone but Him. Only say nice things with His name and do not gossip about Him so forget about free speech.

Yeah, God is a jealous egomaniac, but do not tell Him I said so because I may need God to keep me out of the electric chair.

* * *

Part Three: Promises Broken

May 24; Austin 11 Weeks Earlier

Chapter 31

JAYDEN

I never in my life stole a girl's undies, even in high school or college—underwear was private shit, right? My excuse for stealing Ronni's panties was to quickly get to know my sister-in-law. How much closer can a man get to a woman than walking his fingers through her panties?

My nose was running and there was no tissue. I blew my nose in the middle of Ronni's panty crotch, inhaling fabric softener, which started a sneezing fit.

Yeah, I think I might be allergic to my sister-in-law. Sex with her might just make me sick so just cool it, Jayden. Stay away from Ronni! Crap, she ended up being attractive. The picture in Brad's wallet was a bad photo of her.

The phone rang and it was Brad hissing and spitting like a tiger. "Why are you answering with your own name? I asked to speak to Dr. O'Boyle."

"I'm alone. Oh, I see, Brandy may be listening to see if any of your other lovers are calling you."

"Well, I think you're having an affair with *your* receptionist," he countered.

"Irene is 64 years old, Brad."

"I can see you doing that wrinkled cherry." He laughed.

"Very funny. Have some respect." While he jabbered on, I was having sexual thoughts about his wife.

I suckle her breast breathing as if my lungs pain me.

Oh God. Ronni removed her hand from my crotch. Why does she do that? Why is she torturing me?

Then she grabs my hips and starts humping against me, actually humping like a bitch in heat. She is begging for it, wanting it badly.

I can barely catch my breath and gently lower her to the stairs.

I lay on top of her grinding my hips against her hips. I can feel her rising tension as she moves her crotch wildly against me. Higher. Higher. Trying to reach heaven.

“Your room or mine?” I whisper into her ear in ragged breaths.

I would have taken Ronni on the stairs if it had not been so uncomfortable for her. It hurts to climb off her. I throb with desire and crave relief. I want my sister-in-law more than I have ever wanted any woman. If she denies me now I cannot be responsible for what I might do anyway.

“Jayden, are you there?” His voice nearly blew my eardrum.

“Uh, yeah, you were saying, Brad?”

“You promised me two weeks minimum. Why switch back now with only three days left to go? Is Ronni nagging you to death, her screechy voice making you want to run back to Canada with your tail between your legs?”

No, make that flee back to Canada with my dick between my legs and not inside your wife. She is touching herself, playing with her clit, knowing that I am watching. And I am kneeling outside her door, my eye in the keyhole, jacking off. How sick is that, huh? Please help me here, Brad! I am falling into hell. I vacillate between wanting to kill your wife or screw her for torturing me into a horny teenager with cum in my pants as she shakes her booty up the stairs, wearing a short skirt, for my benefit, I hope. Please help me here, Brad! Geez, my hands shake just thinking about your wife.
“Uh, alright, a month more,” I agreed like a weak adolescent teenage boy. If I had a wife, I would never have suggested to Brad that we change places. You would think with his warped sense of humor, he would be curious whether Ronni and I were getting along with me posing as her husband. I thought the masquerade funny and was laughing behind her back. Contrarily, panic tightened my chest. She is your sister-in-law. Leave the woman alone!

All Brad said was, “Another month, good. Man up! I do not care if you slap my wife, dude. We twins have to stick together. No woman should

ever come between us.”

“Uh, sure,” I said in the high-pitched, screechy voice he accused Ronni of having. We both hung up at the same time, getting on each other’s nerves.

I dropped my head on my desk and groaned. Another month of hell! I should have run back home and kicked Brad out of my house. In doing so, thousands of miles would be between temptations of having sex with my sister-in-law.

Brad never asked about Traci. Yeah, I should have been a pediatrician. It turned out I was good with the munchkins. On the other hand, her mother was turning me into a pervert. I was always the good boy, the excellent student, the exceptional son, the great boss. This switcheroo was changing my morals. Married women have always been off limits but the excitement of the forbidden was a powerful draw. This insatiable lust needed to stop. A man always wanted what he should not have, what is bad for him, dangerous, and taboo but a brother’s wife was not even on the charts.

Then it seemed like my problems were over when Ronni started dressing like a nun, but going all the way with a nun must be more taboo than doing a sister-in-law, right? I could see me butt naked with a priest’s collar choking my neck and her wearing just a nun’s headpiece.

To make matters worse, Ronni started going out and it all blew up in my face, or I should say blew up in my pants in the back seat of Brad’s car. And Ronni said *I don’t play fair?* She has been the one performing stripteases when she knew I was spying. These sex games between us must cease. My sister-in-law twisted my insides with self-loathing and wanting.

Ronni scared the bejesus out of me when she said that we *have* to visit Brad’s parents.

Note: Tell Brad to avoid my folks.

Note: Quit being sacrilegious about the Catholic Church.

Note: Remember Austin is not big enough for both Ronni and me. Quit confusing yourself with her husband. Quit lusting after your brother’s

wife. Keep your willy in your pants.

Yup, the zipperoo was yanked up all the way to my belly button. Maybe I should just buy me a chastity belt and throw away the key. Yeah, during the Renaissance, the Age of Enlightenment, men used to lock up their woman's crotch. Nowadays, there were chastity belts designed for both men and women practicing BDSM, which stood for: Bondage Domination Submission Masochism. I have never been involved in BDSM but a friend of mine enjoyed lying on his back while his girlfriend poured stripes of different colored, piping-hot wax across his chest. His blistering colorful skin made him feel like he was *somewhere under the rainbow*. His dominatrix handcuffed him while she did this and locked his big toes in thumbcuffs—sounded like a real good time.

At least Traci liked me.

Note: The kid liked Brad. Traci liked her father, remember, moron? Do not get caught up in the family thing. You always have been and always will be an island.

Chapter 32

BRAD

I am a master of deception and excel at masquerading as my twin. Whenever someone calls me by Jayden's name, I do not even twitch. Jayden, on the other hand, is a neurotic pussy. I had to reassure him repeatedly about meeting my parents.

Mother sees the world through shot glasses so she will not focus on differences between us, if any. Father *might* ask Jayden a personal question and then take a deep breath, before yapping about something else before Jayden can respond. The old man mostly speaks to walls and trees and never to me.

I have always been a Christmas tree ornament to my adoptive parents. My summers were spent at baseball camp, football camp, basketball camp, astronaut camp, Boy Scout camp, get-in-touch-with-feelings camp, and anger camp in Phoenix, my favorite desert where they sent me every year July, the hottest most pissed off month. My parents even sent me to one of those camps for kids allergic to sunlight. They drew fake freckles all over me so I would resemble one of the *Children of the Night*, kids with XP. I walked around with my eyes closed during the day and my skin marked up with a fake pigmentation disorder. The *Children of the Night* camp was fun until they expelled me for biting one of the kids on the neck and trying to suck his blood out.

Against Jayden's orders, I drive over to see his folks. The so-called farm turns out to be a measly 11 acres, the size of a small cemetery. His parents come at me like zombies wanting to eat my brains, they are that happy to see their son. No wonder Jayden is like Woody from *Toy Story*. Who's my puppet? I conned Jayden into trading places. Am I the man or what?

Really, Jayden has all his childhood pets lined up at the farm with little headstones and names like Bingo. What kind of fairy names his dog Bingo, like the old farm song B-I-N-G-O? B-I-N-G-O. B-I-N-G-O. And Jayden is his name.

My one dog was Brutus; now that is a dog name. One Christmas break from boarding school, Brutus died while being operated on so his ears would be pointy. I am a huge *Star Trek* fan and turning Brutus into *Spock* was supposed to be my Christmas present.

My brother's condominium is a penthouse located in the Westside Village near downtown Victoria and the inner harbor. His bachelor pad is right out of *GQ*, lucky dope. My butt is freezing in Canada since the temperature is in the 60's during the day and June no less. Ha! Jayden's balls must be melting in Austin, especially since he is so worried about visiting my parents.

His condo is so frickin' pristine, his shoes lined up military style, shirts starched crisp, pants pressed with a sharp crease, and not a dirty stitch of clothing or speck of dust anywhere. My end of our deal is to ditch his girlfriend for him, but Vanessa is a smoking hot redhead. There is such a thing as before-breakup sex, but then Vanessa has to go and ruin our sex life by whining. "You seem off, Jayden. You're not as good in bed as you usually are."

Me not as good in the sack as my brother?

"Next time we make love maybe you should try a little harder. Something's missing."

I feel like choking her. No way in hell can Jayden be better in bed—our equipment is the exact same size.

Vanessa licks her lips. "Well." She tosses her head back. "You usually don't finish so fast and just leave me hanging. This is the first time I didn't..."

I sit on Vanessa's chest, shoving my flaccid member into her mouth.

Vanessa gags and I push her off the bed. "Go home, right now, you twat!"

Vanessa scampers from the room, dressing as she is fleeing.

I rest my cheek on my brother's pillow, thinking of throwing Jayden's toys back in his toy box and flying back to Austin. Instead, I call him to

cheer me up. “How’s Pussy treating *you*?”

The dude sounds as if he is choking on dick and with him being so neat, he may be.

“You know, Pussy, my cat?” I remind him.

“Yeah, right, Pussy the cat. Pussy wakes me up in the morning by licking my balls and nipples. Cat thinks I’m its mama.” He chuckles.

“That cat really hates me!”

“You sound jealous, Brad.”

“What? Of your balls? Mine are much bigger, dude.”

“Yeah, but mine are prettier.”

There is an uncomfortable silence between us and then Jayden gargles in a soulful voice, “I wish I could turn back time.”

“To before you agreed to our masquerade or to when we were one egg in our mother’s womb, one person, sharing one heartbeat?”

He changes the subject. “Have you broken up with Vanessa yet?”

“Oops there is another call coming in,” and I grind my thumb into the *End Call* button.

The caller-id on my phone is pulsing like an orgasm. An addiction to a woman is worse than gambling, alcohol, what have you, and I am not talking just being pussy whipped. Throw in the heart, the soul and...Barbie punched me in the gut seven years ago and then left me. I cannot remember now what our fight was about, but she threw her engagement ring in my beer glass. I was so sloshed that I swallowed the ring.

We eventually kissed, made up, and planned a wedding. Our coming nuptials were even posted in the *Austin American Statesman*.

Ronni would have remained my dirty little secret if not for her jailbait pregnancy. A man can get rid of a wife but not a daughter. A child is for life, even an unplanned daughter.

Ah, my screwed up life does not matter anyway. There are two deaths standing in the way of me ever marrying Barbie—her husband and my wife.

I press the answer button and my voice drops to my lap. “Hello, love of my life.”

Barbie has a breathy, sex-kitten voice she perfected in high school. “Brad,” she breathes into the phone. “Slam your baseball bat into me! Catch my muffin with your mitt!”

My pants are smoking at the video Barbie just texted me. She is lying on her feathered bed with her blonde hair spread out on a peacock pillow and legs spread open, thighs quivering, hips humping, arms outstretched in invitation.

Barbie sticking the cell phone up her nasty and me talking dirty inside her should be a commercial:

“Phone sex with our cellular phone is crisper than any of our competition.

Can you hear me now, beaver?

How about now, puss?”

Chapter 33

JAYDEN

Brad yelled into the phone, “Did you fuck her?”

I lied. “God, no! I wasn’t intimate with your wi...”

“If you touched, Barbie, I’ll kill you, Jayden! Barbie said she hated me and never wanted to see me again. She accused me of bonking every streetwalker in Philly. What did you tell her?”

“I told your whore I had the clap.” I smiled at the expletives at the other end of the phone line.

“Dammit, Jayden, the clap? How long am I supposed to swear off sex with Barbie while waiting to be disease free? Barbie is no whore; she’s a lady”

“What was I supposed to do? The *lady* came into your office, begging me for it.”

There was an ominous silence at the end of the phone line.

“You still did not answer me, Jayden. Have you had sex with Barbie?”

“The mention of the clap was enough to scare her off me. How would a married woman explain the clap to her husband, huh? She believed I was you, Brad. You are confusing us. I am supposed to be you, remember? I had to tell her something. Barbie was all over me.”

There was an expulsion of breath at the other end of the line and some muttering.

“She threw me for a loop when she barged into your office. You never told me about Barbie. Disclosure, Brad. Disclosure.”

“You have anything to do with Barbie, and I’ll rip your face right off your skull! I’ll tear your head off!”

“That’s a bit harsh. What happened to, ‘no woman should come between us’?” I quoted his words back at him.

“Barbie is not a woman. She is a goddess.”

“I don’t want Barbie,” I said in a weary voice. *What about your wife? Don’t you care if I ball Ronni? I slept with your wife last night! Please tell me you want to come home because I am too weak where you wife is concerned to suggest we switch back.*

My brother sulked like a spoiled child. Finally, he said, “I’m going to have to hang low in Canada for a week past our agreement to figure out what to do about this mess you made with Barbie.”

“Fine,” I hastily agreed, needing to figure out things for myself, such as why the prospect of staying in Austin longer made my heart quicken. “Just quit taking off in the middle of the day and abandoning my patients, you got that, Dr. O’Boyle?”

“I only did it twice,” Brad said, again like a sulking kid.

I rolled my eyes to the ceiling. “Twice is too much. I’m over here looking after your patients and I expect the same professional courtesy.”

“Well I expect some courtesy where Barbie is concerned.”

“Barbie is a different animal altogether. You withheld information, Brad. I knew nothing about your mistress. She totally threw me off guard. You talk about me ruining things for you with Barbie, well you...”

“Yes?” His voice was ice cold.

I snapped my mouth shut, almost confessing to Brad that he blew things between his wife and me by having phone sex with Barbie and Ronni thought it was I. My sixth sense warned me to keep quiet about Ronni. “Since we’re being candid, Brandy threw herself at me.”

“Don’t tell Barbie anything about Brandy, got that?”

“Okay, but what about Vanessa? Have you slept with her pretending to be me?” My tone of voice warned him, *do not get me in deeper with*

Vanessa, my soon-to-be ex-sort-of-girlfriend, and I will leave your girlfriends alone.

“I confess to balling her once, grew bored, and ignored her ever since,” he answered.

“You’re sending Vanessa mixed signals by going to bed with her, Brad. You promised to break up with her for me.”

“I gave Vanessa the best lay she’s ever had in her life, and then treated her badly so she’ll hate you. And what do you do, brother? You turn Barbie off me. Barbie is not Vanessa. She is important to me. Barbie and I have a connection you would never understand in a million years.”

“Right.” I made a gesture in the air like jerking off.

“So you return the favor, okay, brother?”

“I already did, by telling your girlfriend I have the clap, I turned off Barbie like you turned off Vanessa.”

“I meant the opposite,” he yelled. “I can’t have a rift between her and me!”

“Well, if you don’t want Barbie to seduce me, she needs to believe you’re diseased.”

“Barbie is not coming onto you!”

“By the way,” I added, “Traci is doing fine. Your daughter is growing like a weed.”

He laughed. “Good comparison.”

I wanted to shake my brother. “She’s a good kid. You’re a lucky man.”

“I’ve got to go. Hope you’re having as much fun as I am.”

“Yeah, it’s a riot being you,” I responded in a flat voice.

The idiot chuckled as though I gave him a compliment.

I stared at the dead phone, thinking about the questions Brad should have asked. “By the way, did you fornicate with my wife? How was she in bed? Did you get her off or is Ronni as cold with you as she is with me?”

I sighed and closed my eyes, desperately needing sleep. *I aim at windmills here obsessing over Ronni’s and Brad’s sex life as husband and wife, lamenting a bed I shouldn’t covet again, a wife who is not mine, and a wedding ring that does not belong to me.*

Only you’re not her husband! Shut up, you bastard, and quit thinking like that. Maybe you should have taken Brandy up on her offer if you needed sex so badly.

Only Brandy was not as taboo as Ronni. Brandy was not so desirable.

What did Ronni have that made me want her so much, to the point that it was painful, yet a joyous, awful ache between my legs? My heart pounded painfully against my chest because I might hurt my brother’s feelings if I continued to sleep with his wife.

Ah, now I get it. No wonder Ronni was so mad about the phone sex call. She knows about Barbie. *Jesus, now I do not feel so guilty about seducing Brad’s wife.*

My only other defense was that I never lived with a woman, so close and handy but forbidden, and devastatingly attractive.

Chapter 34

JAYDEN

Ronni mumbled, “Good night, Brad,” and slept in my arms.

Good night, Brad? I kissed her cheek as if my gentleness would make my vile acts all better, such as climbing into her bed by apologizing for all the bad things Brad ever did to her.

Why did sex have to be so damn good with my sister-in-law? I could have picked up any number of willing women at a bar on Sixth Street or elsewhere. I have lied so many times just to get a woman into bed. My biggest fib lay in bed beside me—*Good night, Brad.*

Don’t let your bed lies bite you, Jayden. I should have corrected Ronni when she screamed out the name “Brad” when we were making love... having sex. I certainly could not inform her after the act when she said “Good night, Brad,” that oh, by the way, my name is really Jayden and I’m your brother-in-law. How would that be for an introduction?

I’m damned for sleeping with my brother’s wife, but she really won’t get hurt This was just sex between a husband and a wife. Ronni won’t find out she really slept with her husband’s twin brother unless Brad tells her.

I yawned and squeezed my eyes shut, trying to turn off my inner dialogue. Anyway, if Ronni ever found out the truth, I would be long gone to Canada and she would have no way of hunting me down.

In a minute, I would creep up the stairs to my brother’s room, like a thief in the night.

The sun streamed in through the bedroom window, caressing me with its warmth.

I turned on my side to doze for a minute, my eyes still groggy from sleep.

Ay!

I banged my head against the headboard. *What the fu...I slept in Ronni's bed! Naked!*

Oh, crap, I had not wanted to wake up with my guilt lying beside me and had hoped to make a quick exit back to Canada this morning.

About seven weeks of living in sin earned me a medal in hell for sleeping with my brother's wife.

Some religions in the world still stoned a woman to death for adultery.

According to some Bible interpretations if a single man had sex with a married woman, then he too committed adultery. On top of that, having sex with my sister-in-law counted as incest because, according to the Bible, sibling-in-law incest existed.

Would it help to get down on my knees and pray? Did God *ever* listen to sinners?

I could tell the devil my sister-in-law appeared unaffected by me having tricked her into the sack these past weeks. Mm, Ronni was rather sexy with her eyes closed and her mouth relaxed.

Okay, stop thinking about having intercourse again.

I gently moved the blanket off my chest in preparation of a silent exit.

Ronni stirred, her eyelids fluttering.

I flung an arm over my face, pretending to be sleeping.

She quietly got out of bed. The bathroom door creaked open and then closed.

I grabbed my clothes and ran.

The sun was just coming up when I drove quietly away.

I sipped on an iced coffee with the confidence that I would not want Ronni again. Now I could get on with my life. She scratched my itch so much last night, I felt like an open wound.

Quit feeling so bad! Sex, that's all this masquerade was, just sex between consenting adults. You wanted her. You won her. You screwed her. Now Ronni is just like every other woman you've ever slept with.

Consenting adults? Right. Would Ronni have consented if she knew who I really was? She would hate me if she ever found out.

I dared not look back and vowed to never return. I...I just could not face her again.

In San Francisco while boarding a plane to Victoria, my cell phone rang, probably Brad calling again to bitch about Barbie and threatening to rip my guts out.

I punched the *Answer* button. *Her*. You know a woman is special when you think of her as *her*. *Her. Her. Her.*

My heart stopped beating and the blood rushed from my face. Ronni's voice, sounding shy and young, was on the other end.

"Brad?"

Her voice blew my breath away and I doubled over. *You should not have called, Ronni.*

"Brad? Are you there?"

I pushed my finger down on the cell phone and hung up.

I took a deep, shaky breath and walked towards the seat on the plane.

I plopped down in first class, leaned back against the black leather, and closed my eyes. My head hurt and my chest felt tight, remembering her words, "I decided not to give up on us."

Brad's cell phone rang again and I swallowed, breathless. *Do not pick up the phone. Make a clean break.*

Note: There never was an us, dumb shit. Forget about your sister-in-law.

After one more attempt, Ronni gave up.

“Enjoy the flight to San Francisco,” the flight attendant said and sort of winked at my shoes.

My socks did not match. The socks belonged to Brad.

Who gave a rat’s ass about *anything* belonging to my brother?

Chapter 35

BRAD

There is a rainbow at the end of every sewer. Jayden told Barbie that I have an STD, which can be advantageous. I bought a cane at an airport gift shop and walk as if blind from gonorrhea. The cane and dark glasses is a nice touch. I can board the plane early.

Despite the mean phone calls between us, I bump hard into Jayden's back at the San Francisco Airport, wrap my arms around his stomach, and squeeze as if giving him a Heimlich maneuver so he can cough up his heart.

Jayden wiggles out of my embrace and holds his ribs like one of them broke.

Whoa, his reaction is cold. Jayden is stiff in my arms. My brother never really explained why he wanted to leave Austin. Jayden just said he wanted to come home as if desperate to get away from Ronni. That bitch! What did that hussy do to scare my brother away? Ronni can be a real shrew.

I place an arm around him and pinch his shoulder. "So how did it go with you and my wife?"

"We managed to stay out of each other's way," he mumbles and looks down at the floor.

"If Ronni did anything to piss you off..."

"She didn't," he screeches. Jayden avoids my eyes. "Just do me a favor and don't tell her about our trading places."

"I must apologize for my wife. I know what a harpy she can be."

Jayden opens his mouth and then clamps his lips shut. He shakes my hand as if we just completed a business deal.

I slap him on the back, wishing him God speed on his journey.

We exchange wallets, keys, cell phones, etc.

Jayden spins on his heel and walks towards his gate.

“Hey, Jayden!”

He spins around.

“Thanks, dud, for the experience of a lifetime.” Ha, he thought I said, dude. “Let’s keep in touch.”

Jayden simply waves back.

I give my brother a final wave of dismissal though his back is to me. No one gets the last word but Brad O’Boyle.

I swagger towards the gate.

Holy crap! Quit walking like a peacock! I forgot that gonorrhea was supposed to have blinded me. My brother did not even ask me about the cane. For all he knows, I may have broken my hip on his *Andy Warhol* rug—a frickin’ giant can of Campbell’s tomato soup on a shopping bag sprinkled with coke powder. I had a going away party last night at Jayden’s though no one but me knew I was leaving. I did not bother to vacuum the rug. Jayden could use a snort of cocaine in his life. He is too intense.

I wrap the sunglasses around my eyes and shake my head, looking cool like a *Blues Brother*, the thin handsome one, not the slob.

I tap the cane towards the gate, humming *Stand by Your Man*.

“Blind man coming through. Make way. Make way.”

The sea of passengers part for me as if I am really somebody.

I knock a little kid out of the front of the *Board First* line. Hey, a blind man can get away with anything, crybaby! Now, Dr. Brad O’Boyle is first in line, head of the class.

I announce to the rest of the passengers. “I’m a doctor so if anyone gets sick aboard the plane I can still operate, though blind from birth.”

Geez, no one on this flight has a sense of humor.

I push my rump onto a first-class seat and cannot stop laughing at the thought of Jayden and Ronni living together for nearly eight weeks.

I had really sort of hoped Ronni would annoy Jayden so much that he would kill my wife.

Chapter 36

JAYDEN

Brad had been creepy at times during our masquerade, as if he was trying to take over my life and really become me.

Oh, God, Traci, I forgot to say good-bye to my niece. My heart twisted at the thought of Traci walking into school with her *Bat* backpack slung across her shoulder. I will miss the child. It was fun being an uncle and having a niece to spoil. Maybe Brad could break the news to Ronni that he has a long-lost twin brother, and I could visit, but the thought of facing Ronni and Brad together knotted my stomach.

“What the heck?” Vanessa’s car was parked in front of my condo.

I pulled my car into the garage thinking maybe Vanessa being here was not such a bad idea.

Before Vanessa could even say hello, I dragged her into the bedroom and slammed my hand over her mouth to keep her from singing. I turned my head to the side, pounded her, and then rolled to the side so we were no longer touching. *Whew, that was not very good, unlike...*

Vanessa purred like a cat. “This past week, Jayden, you acted like you were bored with me. You even threatened me with a knife if I continued singing to you.”

“What!”

She ran her finger down my chest, giggling like a little girl. “Of course you were joking.”

“Yeah, I’m a real joker, Vanessa, if only you knew.”

She pulled at the hair on my chest rubbing her breasts against my stomach. “You seem to have finally gotten it right again. I haven’t had an orgasm since you came back from Philadelphia.”

I groaned, not caring to know any more about Brad’s private life, especially his performance in bed. Vanessa was a hypocrite; I just had sex

with her and felt unsatisfied. Since when was Vanessa not good in bed? The act was now empty, a lack of connection.

Ronni, I thought with disgust. It was great with Ronni last night. An hour ago, I wished to God to never have slept with my sister-in-law and now longed for her bed.

Do not even think it. Don't! However, I could no longer deny that there had been something special with Ronni.

No way! That something was not love. That thing was sick perverted sex because our relationship was taboo, which added to the thrill, much like a married man having an affair, only more so.

Slam, bam, you're welcome, Ma'am, was about as far as my relationships with the fairer sex usually played out. Sometimes a woman lasted a few months until she became too clingy, like Vanessa.

If a man needed a companion, he could get a dog.

"I need a cold shower." I slapped Vanessa in the face with the sheet and walked into the bathroom. "You can see yourself out."

"I'm not sleeping here, Jayden?"

"No, Vanessa, you're not," and I slammed the bathroom door.

I leaned my head against the wall, moaning. *What to do? What to do?* There was a hollow feeling in my chest and an ache in my gut.

I sunk to the closet floor and held the phone to my chest. I took a deep breath and called Brad's cell. His phone was off so I left a message. The matter was urgent so I tried his home phone.

Come on, pick up, Brad. Do not let it be...

Yipes! Ronni answered.

I hung up on her and dropped my head in my hands, groaning. Hearing her voice made me feel guilty about sleeping with Vanessa. How crazy was that? I accused Brad of being creepy; what was happening to me? I was not Ronni's husband and had the right to sleep with anyone. Ronni had no hold over me. I always thought, *this time. This time will be the last,*

or so I promised myself until the next time she invited me back into her bedroom with her eyes, lips and every gesture of her body language.

Note: You are not in danger of losing your head over your brother's wife.

Yet an odd sense of relief lightened my chest because Brad was not at home with Ronni right now.

Or was he? Maybe they were having sex right now!

I tried my best to shampoo my sister-in-law out of my hair. *Ronni was someone new so exciting. If I slept with her again, she would be as disappointing as Vanessa was.* I snorted; my time in Austin posing as a married man made me even more cynical. Women were always the downfall of men.

I stepped out of the shower, and Vanessa sat on the bathtub, shaving her legs.

Yeah, Vanessa had moved all her shit into my bathroom while Brad was living here—so much for his promise to dump her for me!

She lifted her head and broke out in song, some broken tune, or other.

I wish I could get rid of that woman for good!

Chapter 37

BRAD

Barbie calls to change our meeting place from the Congress Avenue Bridge to Lovers Leap. “I aim to push you off, Brad.”

Very funny, ha-ha. I curse Jayden up the ass and down some in an email, a phone message, and to the mirror. Her anger at me is his entire fault.

Austin Saturday night traffic on Mopac is *the* Bitch of the Black Tar. I exit to Ranch Road 2222, as if the traffic crapped on me four times, and then hang a left on Mount Bonnell Rd.

Mount Bonnell has stairs and a flat top. The mount is windy, and Barbie may push me off, or God may blow me across the little brick wall and into the Colorado River.

I pace nervously on the cobblestones looking at my watch.

Barbie drives up in a pickup and yells at me through a megaphone, “You slept with a bunch of Philly hookers, Brad!”

“Come up here, and I’ll prove my innocence!”

I flip out a picture from my wallet taken in Philly of me and Jayden and shove the photo under Barbie’s nose. “That’s my twin brother and he was impersonating me.”

She studies the image, rubbing my brother’s face, scratching his chin, and letting her fingers linger on his lips. Then her index finger slides to the zipper of his pants and she scratches. “You know, Brad, I think your brother is a bit cuter than you are. I bet he has a better-looking dick. Maybe I should have tried harder to screw him.”

What!

She cocks her head as if aiming a gun. “Sensitive men make the best lovers.” She laughs. “With Jayden, it would have been like making love with a kinder, gentler Brad. Wouldn’t that be a riot? Huh?”

She wants to make love with my brother! Why does she say those words, go and hurt me like that? “Barbie, please don’t!” Goddamnit my voice is ragged; her words are ripping out my tonsils.

“Ah, poor baby.” She smiles with pity in her hazel eyes. *Pity!*

The vein in my temple pounds so that my head may explode.

“Don’t worry, Brad, your poopsi whoopsi is here to make you feel all better.” She wiggles her hand inside my pants and gives me a squeeze, chuckling at my hard-on. The witch is so attractive that I’m like a frickin’ \$3 *Remember the Alamo* fridge magnet stuck on her tight rump and the bitch is sitting on me, smashing my heart.

Barbie takes my hand and leads me to the bed of her pickup. She came prepared with a blanket and quilt spread out. I have marched through hell for this woman and she wants a sensitive lover? A gentle lover? A Jayden lover?

I rip the zipper from her jeans and grab such a big handful that I even tear the front of her underpants.

“Brad, you’re hurting me. Your nails are like claws.”

I pant like a wild animal. My eyes barely focus but I can smell her fear.

She scoots back until her head bangs against the pickup. “Brad, quit hurting me!”

Does she think she can push her skull through the pickup wall and get away from me?

I slam her hips down on the bed of the pickup and twist her hands above her head, pinning her with my heavier weight. “So you want my brother?” I hiss.

“I was only fooling, Br...Bra...Brad.”

“You liar! When you looked at his picture, you crossed your legs tight like Jayden was inside you.”

“He looks just like you, Brad.”

“I’ll give you my brother. Say Jayden, I want you.” I grab a handful of yellow hair and yank her head back. “Say it!”

“Jay...Jayden, I want you.”

I ram into Barbie with the intent of hurting her.

She starts grunting like a pig. Barbie always sounds like a pig during copulation, tiny little grunts.

She is not supposed to enjoy sex with Jayden!

I try to pull out but she locks her legs around me. She rocks her hips, grunting and snorting, and shaking all over. She runs her hands over her breasts and squeezes. Her eyes are closed and she is panting. She screams out, “Jayden,”

My sword goes limp and shrinks to one of those little dull knives for spreading soft cheese on a stale cracker.

Her head falls back against the bed of the pickup. An evil gleam sparkles from her eyes. “You know I said Jayden on purpose just to goad you, sugar pie.”

I turn my back to her and zip up my pants. This has never happened before, not being able to finish to completion. Bubba has a difficult time in bed but then he is old. He ordered a pump. Barbie always laughs about men who are not really men.

She smiles with her legs spread. Her eyes cloud with the aftermath of good sex. She licks her lips and moans.

Is she still thinking of my brother? But...it was I, not Jayden, who made her scream out with pleasure. But...she screamed out my brother’s name. My Goddamn head is throbbing. I am confusing myself with Jayden. The same thing happened in Canada a few times with my slut Vanessa. No, she is my brother’s whore. Barbie, the woman I love, wants to get it on with my brother.

Barbie leans against the back of the pickup, sighing contentedly. The vamp could care less about my aching heart. She lights a cigarette. "Bubba asked me where I was going, and I told him to the hospital to visit a friend so he let me out of the house. You being gone so long helped. My hubby is not so suspicious any more, lover. I've been working on Bubba since you came back from Philly." She frowns and mumbles, "I mean, since Jayden traded places with you."

She said my brother's name with a deep sigh and she clenched her crotch, her eyes all dreamy.

"Bubba really believes me when I tell him how much I've come to love only him." She laughs and then snorts like a piglet. "Old fart looks at me all starry eyed like I make him the happiest man who ever lived. We still have to be careful though. Ugh! His touch is like a reptile." Barbie shudders and blows out smoke through her pinched nostrils, the result of too much cocaine.

I sprinkle some coke on her bare feet, rolling up a \$10 bill, and snorting from her toes. Instant high, though sweat drenches my face and my heart is going like a roller coaster. "So when are you gonna leave Bubba for me?" I ask in a sulky voice.

"Are you crazy?" she shouts. She flicks her cigarette away, no longer in the mood for a smoke. "I've seen Bubba's will. If he dies of a heart attack because I leave him for another man, then I get nothing. You think I put up with that old fart all these years to walk away with just the clothes on my back?"

"I ought to murder that husband of yours, and then we could be together." I sit down beside her and she inches away from me. I sling an arm around her and nibble on her shoulder. Many times, we have imagined Bubba's death.

Barbie shoves me. "You leave Bubba Simpson alone, Brad O'Boyle. If he dies under any mysterious circumstance, I will get none of his millions. Zippo. Nothing. His entire fortune will go to his kids."

"Would you leave Bubba for Jayden if he asked you?"

“Well your brother doesn’t have a wife and a kid does he? Maybe you ought to kill your wife and I would consider it,” she says laughing.

“My brother has a fiancée. Jayden is engaged to a beautiful woman.”

She rolls her eyes. “Quit acting insanely jealous, Brad. I don’t really know your brother.” She dusts off her jeans and pulls her t-shirt out to cover the rip on her zipper. “I’ve got to go over to the hospital and pick up something at the gift shop so Bubba will know I was telling the truth when I said my girlfriend was sick.”

Barbie jumps off the pickup and climbs in the driver’s seat, revving up the engine.

I pound the window with my fist. “Lying cunt! What really happened between you and Jayden?”

Quick, she locks the doors. The wheels of her pickup spin in the dirt, and Barbie nearly runs over my toes and disappears in a cloud of dust.

I slam the door so hard of my Mercedes, the car rocks on its tires.

She wants to fuck Jayden! The thought keeps going through my brain and I can barely make out the road.

Okay, calm down. Do not get so upset that you crash into the car in front of you. Don’t drive down Capital of Texas Highway like a crazy man.

I cuddle with my folks, and then drive home.

Ronni’s romantic candlelight dinner she prepared for the two of us is piled in the sink.

Ronni cooked me a romantic candlelight dinner. Before I went to Philly, she would have liked to poison me.

Just what was Jayden up to with my wife?

The bitches all prefer my brother, Vanessa, Ronni, and now Barbie.

Chapter 38

BRAD

I mumble, half-asleep, “This is Dr. O’Boyle,” using my title out of habit.

“This is Dr. Tremblay. You asked Vanessa to marry me!”

“Can’t this wait, dude? It’s two a.m. here.”

“No, it cannot wait. I distinctly told you to break up with Vanessa.”

“I’m not a trained monkey you can just order around, man.”

“The breakup was the only reason I agreed to our charade. You had no right asking her to marry me; I mean, marry you.”

I jerk up in bed, banging my skull against the headboard. “I already have a wife, remember? The marriage proposal was a joke.”

“Well, I’m not laughing. You bought her an expensive engagement ring charged to *my* credit card!”

“You don’t want to be cheap when asking a woman to be your wife.”

“Get back to Canada and break up with Vanessa, now!”

“Tell her to get lost yourself.”

“You promised to dump her.”

“Fine. Whatever. I’ll fly back tomorrow after work.”

“I’ll book two flights and email you the travel arrangements.”

Jayden slams down the phone. Ouch, my ears.

I tiptoe down the stairs, snapping on the study light. Thorns cut my hands as I yank roses from a vase, ripping petals and leaves from the stems. I break the stems over my knee, pushing some thorns into my naked thigh.

I roar from the pain and march into the den with my arms held out like a zombie in a monster movie.

There are three dozen frickin' roses in here and I slam the vases on the floor, drowning some of the carpet in water.

I stand there with blood dripping down my arms and legs thinking Jayden played his own joke on me with Barbie, and it is not funny, not by a long shot.

Ronni has been nicer and acting lovey-dovey because she thought I sent her the roses, even though there was no name on the card for recipient or from sender. Of course, the roses are mine, which was why Jayden left the names of the recipient and sender blank. The flowers were a thank you for letting him masquerade as me.

He wrote me four notes with his four dozen roses and I now see a sinister meaning.

The note with the red roses reads: For taking advantage of me.

No, you took advantage of me!

The note with the black roses reads: For giving me what I wanted.

You mean, for giving you Barbie!

The note with the yellow roses reads: You light up my life.

Well, that is very true.

The note with the white roses reads: Because I am sorry.

And I'm sorry, too, that I ever met you, Jayden Tremblay.

I claw the sides of my face, drawing blood. *This is Jayden's face, his skin.*

I fall to my knees, sobbing like a baby.

Dammit, why couldn't my brother love me!

Chapter 39

JAYDEN

We met up at the Minneapolis airport. Brad stuck his chin out. “Chill out, Jayden. Don’t let a dingbat like Vanessa come between us,”

I gave him a cold look.

“Nice roses you sent by the way.”

The roses I sent Ronni, right. I slept with Brad’s wife. A twinge of guilt clouded my eyes but then anger over Vanessa made me see red again. I trusted him. He should have kept his promise.

Brad held his hand out to me, biting his cheek. His scratched hands made him appear as if he got into a fight with a wild cat.

I shook my brother’s hand. His smile never reached his eyes.

“Well, good luck with Vanessa.”

“Yeah, you, too.” he responded.

Was Brad wishing me luck with Ronni? I scratched my head, walking towards the gate. When Brad mentioned the flowers I sent his wife, he did not act upset. Did he read the notes with the roses, in particular the note thanking Ronni for giving me what I wanted?

Well, my brother just gave me what I wanted—sex with his wife without guilt. Brad gave me permission to sleep with Ronni!

Her hold over me was driving me nuts. It was just sex, nothing more. Yet, the airport spun around me at the thought of my sister-in-law.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow I will see her again. Her. Her. Her.

A part of me wanted to see Ronni, a portion of me hated to, some of me needed to, and all of me dreaded to be with her once more.

Whatever would I say to her?

“Hi, I’m back. Uh, you do not really know me but you do. I am Brad’s identical twin brother, the man you slept with Saturday night and several weeks before that. Oh, by the way, for old time’s sake, how about a quickie before I return in a couple of days to Canada, after your husband Brad breaks off my engagement, his engagement actually. By the way, your husband asked another woman to marry him.”

God, help me, I imagined dragging Brad’s wife to the floor and having hot sex with her.

I sat on my seat in the plane with my eyes closed, imagining whispering into Ronni’s ear in a deep throaty voice, “What if I just rip your pants off here on the stairs?”

Her voice rattled with desperation of her own. “My room. Mine.”

You’re mine tonight, I thought. Mine, if only for a night.

Chapter 40

JAYDEN

It was too easy to step back into the role of playing Brad.

I snapped on the bedroom light and Ronni blinked her sleep-filled eyes.

I lied about working late at the hospital, undressed, and climbed into bed with her.

I cupped her crotch and humped against her. She mumbled something about not disappointing me.

I ached with lust, pressing under the covers against her leg. “Let me. Let me fu...make love to you.”

I was way beyond desire and might take her any way if she said no, but Ronni was soft and pliable, moaning as she stroked me.

Oh, my god! She lowered her head and shyly kissed the tip. The sight of her lips pecking me, her long hair stroking my thighs nearly drove me insane.

I will go mad if I do not spill my seed into her.

Shit, didn't think. I forgot to put on a rubber.

I lifted her head from my lap and reached for my pants pocket.

She grabbed the prophylactic and tossed it. She sat down on me, grinding her hips.

“But...”

Yeah, but. Ronni was rocking with friction, circling her hips, and I yelled out, collapsing into the mattress.

Oh, crap! I better not have made a baby with my sister-in-law!

It was at spooning moments with her naked leg rubbing against mine, our hands entwined, all relaxed by our lovemaking, that the guilt seeped

back. However, the night was long and the memory short. Even though I was pretending to be Brad, Ronni had said yes to *me*.

Then she went and ruined our after-sex cuddling by saying, “Let’s make a baby, Brad,” or something like that. I cannot remember her exact words because it sounded like a train roared down the tracks, right through my ears.

Mental note: *Do not get your sister-in-law pregnant. QUIT HAVING SEX WITH HER! And don’t you dare think that the damage is already done after tonight, you horny bastard! Buy a bushel of rubbers!*

“No baby, no way, Ronni!” I climbed out of bed, twisting my ankle in the sheets and landing on my ass on the carpet. Ass is right. *Brad and Ronni do not sleep together. He would know! Brad would kill me!*

Ronni scrambled across the bed and shone a flashlight in my eyes, maybe to see if I was serious about not wanting a kid with her.

“Look, Ronni, I want you to death. I need you like the air I breathe. You’re the drug that I crave, the high that I need.” Luckily, we did not have the same taste in music so I could take credit for poetic lyrics. A romance dork like me quoted lines from a song by *Pulp*. “You’re the habit I can’t seem to kick. You are the car I never should have bought. You are the train I never should have caught.”

She did not get that the words to the song were my confession. I had to end this...this sickness...this obsession for my sister-in-law, but then Ronni walked up to me and began unbuttoning the front of my shirt.

I smacked her fingers and could not button my shirt fast enough because my hands were shaking.

She placed her hot lips against my skin and tasted me.

God, I could not breathe. She rained kisses down my chest with each button she popped open, exposing more of my flesh.

I rocked my hips against her, sighing in defeat.

She yanked my shirt from my arms.

I gave her a quick kiss but mainly to divert her while I slipped on a rubber.

I closed my eyes even as I pushed into her. *Oh, God, help me from wanting to have intercourse with this woman.*

Oh, Jesus, she feels good.

God, I want to have intercourse with her. Please.

After I found religion in her pussy and we were finished rolling around the carpet, I pulled out and the rubber stuck to her leg.

She picked up the prophylactic and slapped me in the face with our unborn babies, well my half anyway. We were not even married and already splitting the kids up.

I scowled back at her. *You have no idea, lady, what dumb ass may have actually got you pregnant when he had unprotected sex with you tonight.*

I sprinted to the shower, pumping my biceps, and once more attempted to wash my sister-in-law from my hair only Ronni's smell was all over me. No matter how much I scrubbed, I inhaled her like an aphrodisiac.

Yeah, I like to sing in the shower, who doesn't? I sang some more lyrics by Pulp.

"You are the party that makes me feel my age. You are a car crash I see but cannot avoid. Like a plane, I've been told I never should board. You are the dream I never should have caught."

Note: You are not in danger of losing your head over your brother's wife but QUIT SLEEPING WITH HER YOU MORON!

Chapter 41

JAYDEN

Five days back in Austin, and I am still in love...I mean infatuated...I mean obsessed...I mean pussy-whipped by my brother's wife.

Note: Never use the word love where your sister-in-law is concerned.

Okay, so we went from fucking to screwing to having intercourse, and now we made love. It was just semantics really, no big deal. Making love and being in love was not the same thing.

"Quit staring at me with accusation," I mumbled to Brad's office picture, which was snapped in a golf setting. Brad's expression was serious as if he was about to bash the opposing player's head in with his golf club. I turned the 8x10 face down and flipped the other pictures of Brad hanging on the walls of his office.

This *thing* with my sister-in-law was not yet a catastrophe. There was no word about a baby yet.

There was still no word from Brad either nor did I bother to call. Apparently, Brad was just as loathe to leave Canada.

I placed my cowboy boots on Brad's desk and knocked his picture off. Yeah, I bought some boots in Texas, as when in Rome, right? My brother's picture went sliding across the carpet and under the black leather sofa.

The door opened and the nurse said, "Your first patient is waiting, Dr. O'Boyle."

I strolled down the hall whistling.

I grabbed the chart by examining room number three and opened the door without reading the patient's name on the chart. My head was down, scanning the info for vital data—a new patient with symptoms and complaint left blank. "What seems to be the problem, Miss Knightly?"

"The name is Mrs. Simpson. Knightly is my maiden name, sugar."

All the blood rushed from my face. Barbie wore only an examining gown. Pillows supported her head. Her feet rested on stirrups. She spread her legs wide open and was naked under her gown. She put on quite a production, adjusting her pose, lifting her rump, wiggling her hips, and humping the air.

I threw a blanket over her exposed female parts. “Sit up,” I barked. “You know damn well I’m not a gynecologist.”

“Well you should remove the stirrups from your examining table then, or did you leave them up on purpose?”

“I’m busy. What do you want?”

She jumped off the table and cornered me, flinging her arms around my neck. “You know what I want, *Brad*.”

“I told you before; I have the clap so...”

“Cut the bullshit, Dr. Tremblay.”

“What...what did you call me?”

“I know who you are, Jayden.” She walked her fingers down my chest, her fingers headed towards my...

I peeled her arm from around my neck and grabbed her hands to keep her from grabbing me like last time. “So you know who I am, Mrs. Simpson.” All pretense of politeness was gone from my voice and I twisted her arms behind her back. I preferred not to touch her but if I let go, she would be pawing inside my pants.

“Call me Barbie, darling. Mrs. Simpson is my mother-in-law.”

“Brad told you about us.”

“Your brother tells me everything,” she said, smirking.

“I’m sure he does.” The dislike on my face was apparent. Surely, she would take the hint.

Barbie was so full of herself; my frigidness did not even faze her.

She yanked her hands from my grasp and wiggled out of the hospital gown. The material fell to her ankles and she stood stark naked. She sucked in her stomach, thrusting her breasts out. She had a beautiful body and knew it. "I'm dynamite in bed, just ask Brad."

Right, as if I would do that. *Hey, bro, I want to have sex with your soul mate. Is she any better than your wife, because I have had her in the sack, also.* I preferred a softer woman. "I'll leave so you can get dressed. You appear to be in very good health."

She pounced, wrapping her calves around my thigh and hanging onto my belt, unbuckling it. "Don't be so shy," she said and pushed her tongue out at me. "Fuck me, Jayden." She laughed. "I hear you just got engaged but your fiancé will never know about us since she is all the way down there in cold Canada."

"Canada is north," I said, "which is way up from Texas."

"It is? Geography was never my strongest asset especially with my brain filled with horniness for you ever since Brad told me you're his twin brother."

"You are Brad's girlfriend," I reminded her.

"I promise not to tell your brother either if that's what's keeping you from hooking my feet in the stirrups and riding me hard. Brad has been gone nearly a week. You must be dying for a woman." She grabbed my hand, cupping it on her crotch. "I'll have you begging for it just like Brad does." She rocked, squeezing her thighs together, trapping my hand between her legs.

I lifted a brow at her and sneered, yanking my hand from beneath her thighs.

She gasped. "You're sleeping in the same house with Brad's wife. Are you having sex with that frigid bitch?"

"No," I said a bit too quickly and defensively.

"Liar! I always know when Brad is fibbing so the same goes for you. I promise not to spill the beans to Brad about you and Ronni so long as you

are nice to me. Think about it, doll face. If Ronni was better than me in bed, why would Brad chase after me?"

"You expect me to fornicate with you so that Brad and I can compare notes?"

"To fornicate sounds scientific. I was thinking more like wild sex."

I grasped the door handle. "Brad and I are not that close. Neither of us is into sharing."

She grabbed a gun from her purse poking my chin with the barrel. "Call when you change your mind and you will, cupcake." She ran the pistol down my chest, pushing it against my crotch. She then set the gun next to the computer on the small desk, jumped back on the table, and opened her legs wide. She humped wildly, touching herself and grinning like the devil's concubine. "My number is listed on Brad's cell phone," she moaned.

I spun on my heel and grabbed the door handle.

"You'll come around. It is going to be kooky with you, Jayden. I should do you and Brad at the same time. Uh, uh, uh! You in the front and him in the back. Uh, uh, uh!"

"No chance," I said.

"Uh, uh, uh! Here it comes, Jayden. I'm exploding, imagining you..."

I slammed the door, leaving Barbie alone and grunting like a pig.

I headed straight for the men's bathroom to hide. My hands were shaking. She had no proof about Ronni and me.

I waited five minutes and then peeked into the examining room. Barbie must have been so hot and bothered by her own fingers that she left behind the gun. I slipped some gloves on because touching anything Barbie had touched sickened me. I then dropped the gun in a plastic bag.

Before driving to lunch, I hid the gun in the glove compartment of the Mercedes.

I ordered at the restaurant, waiting for my meal.

My phone pinged with a text. I snorted in disgust. Barbie texted me a video of her lying naked on the examination table and poking herself. She then put a finger in her mouth and winked.

I hit delete and then dialed the phone, punching the numbers so hard that my fingertip was bruised.

The call went straight to voicemail.

“Brad, this is Jayden. Call me when you get a chance. It is important. Got that?” I was cut off after the word ‘It’.

The phone warbled because my eyes were having a hard time focusing.

I punched in the number again, clenching my fists and trying to calm down.

Again, I got his voice mail. I yelled into the phone, “Call off your mistress, Brad. Barbie knows about our masquerade. You promised not to tell anyone!”

I hit the *end* button and then tried once more. Three times was usually the charm.

There was heavy breathing at the other end of the line.

“Did you hear Brad? Answer me! What are you doing about Vanessa?”

“What’s going on, goddamnit? Brad? Are you there?”

A high-pitched voice answered, chuckling into the phone, “If you would like to leave a message, please insert a quarter into your buttohole.”

Click.

The phone went dead.

July 23, 2015

BRAD

A KIND GESTURE IS TO SUPPORT THE LOCAL CANADIAN ECONOMY—I FIND A DRUG DEALER. Our neighbor north of us is *the Breaking Bad* drugstore, just ask seniors on a fixed income. I up my usage of *Ecstasy* as a cure for cluster headaches, which I never had until Jayden.

I stumble from the bathroom of his condominium feeling lovey-dovey. *Ecstasy* is known as the love pill and my eyes are red like a glassy Valentine's card. *Ecstasy* can make you crazy.

Ecstasy may cause hallucinations but this is a first for me.

My brother is standing by the bed, smiling.

I rip out my heart and hand it to him in a champagne glass.

The heart is pumping, the glass overflowing with blood like a fountain.

Jayden drinks my blood and then stomps on the glass like in a Jewish wedding. Mazel tov! Who knows, maybe out mother was Jewish. He then slices his wrist with a shard of champagne glass.

"Drink," he says. "Drink of my blood, your blood."

I suck on his wrist, draining the life of my brother.

Okay, I am thinking about a vampire themed wedding with my brother's girlfriend in Vegas, but settle on Elvis, my favorite ghost.

* * *

Part Four: A Wedding in Vegas

Chapter 42

BRAD

My twin's credit card purchases a 3.71-carat wedding set costing \$40,000, only the best for my brother's bride. He will never sue me because we would both lose our medical licenses since most of our shenanigans have been illegal. For instance, we have been using each other's medical licenses to practice in countries we have no license for and impersonating a different doctor. Then there are the airline flights where we flew as each other using passports, which do not belong to us. Just the passport fraud would earn us about a dozen years in prison.

Bigamy, however, is not an issue. I will never go to prison in either Canada or the U.S. for having two wives since Vanessa believes she married Jayden, not me.

His credit card pays for the ceremony, the Canadian mailing fee to send the wedding video to him, and ditto for our ride in a replica of Elvis' 1955 pink Cadillac Fleetwood. I stand on the back seat with Elvis shades wiggling on my nose. We sing *Viva Las Vegas* while waving like royalty as the car slowly drives up the Vegas Strip. Everyone on the strip is cheering at the *Just Married* sign.

There is enough credit still left on Jayden's card to charge the honeymoon penthouse suite at the *Bellagio Hotel and Casino* where the driver drops us.

Vanessa, being Canadian, is not used to such a strong sun and her skin has blistered. Her white wedding dress has sweatbands under the arms. "I need a drink," she slurs from parched lips. "Come on, honey, let's go up to our honeymoon suite." She has a coughing fit and dust clouds puff from her mouth.

I stare over the top of my sunglasses and shake my hips and legs as though a tarantula is biting my balls. Okay, so in order to play a part I have to get into the role and become Elvis, a young handsome Elvis before he ate his way through Graceland. "Amazing grace, oh how good the steak." My Elvis wig falls crooked on my head. My glazed eyes reflect cocaine and

ecstasy, the best illegal drugs to calm a groom's nerves, especially in an alligators-biting-my-ass situation.

Vanessa pulls at my arm as if she is yanking my chain. "Wasn't our wedding romantic? Next time we go out wear the Elvis black shirt I bought you."

"Quit nagging me," I hiss and punch her in the stomach in a private corner of the casino. "Your voice is like boulders banging inside my skull and knocking off pieces of my brain. And that's about the best compliment you're ever going to get about your singing."

My bride, Jayden's bride that is, crumples to the floor.

I spin my head around the casino and no one is paying attention to us in a sea of flushed faces with glittering eyes hoping to win the big jackpot. *Gimme. Gimme.*

Gimme peace.

"There, there now honey, see what happens when you nag Elvis?" Good. One squeak and fart after punching her and Vanessa is quiet.

A cola cures her hiccups and I order her to, "stay put while I gamble, hear?"

"How come you sound like a Texan instead of Elvis?" Vanessa is stupid cute so can be fun, but this is not one of those times. "I want to go to our room," she moans.

"Later we'll check in. Just sip your drink and be a good little girl. Stay out of Daddy's way." I shift my shoulder in an Elvis groove mood.

"Hit me again," I say in my best Elvis voice and gamble with Jayden's credit card at the casino, the card that is not maxed out. My brother would want to have a good time on his honeymoon and \$13,000 blown at the crap tables and playing black jack is about right for a Vegas groom.

Jayden's bride recovers and hangs by my side at the black jack table, peering over my shoulder, playing with my hair. "Oh, Jayden," she coos,

“you are so romantic, to actually get down on your knees and beg me to marry you. Are you as deliriously happy as I am?”

She is drunk and glows like kryptonite. How do I know what glowy kryptonite looks like? Because I am *Superman* and can see through women’s clothes. “I’m happier,” I say, and my bladder about bursts from laughter, imagining the look of horror on my brother’s face when he finds out that this silly dumb broad is his wife. We have only been married a few hours and I feel like choking the life out of her. I must not be sick to death of Ronni yet, but then she does not whine at a man. Ronni never sings, cries, or talks my block off. She stays out of my way, unlike Vanessa.

I pull my bride up by her underarms and wiggle the room key at her.

In the honeymoon suite, we lift glasses of champagne.

“To us,” Vanessa gushes.

To my brother. I lift the champagne glass and guzzle the sparkling wine. I then throw the glass at the wall, kapow!

I grab another champagne glass and fill it to the top while Vanessa breaks out in song. “Tiny bubbles...”

The champagne glass in my hand shatters, cutting my fingers.

I leap off the bed as if it is a tall building.

“Where are you going, Jayden?”

None of your damn business! I nearly yell at her but instead answer through gritted teeth, “I’m going to the bathroom to bend some steel with my bare hands.”

I huddle on the toilet while Vanessa bangs on the door.

“What are you doing in there, Jayden? Number one or number two?”

If I break Vanessa’s legs, she might quit following me. She did not need to walk down the aisle. We could have had a drive-thru wedding in Vegas.

I will take a cheeseburger with fries and marry this bride for dessert; I mean bury this bride in the desert. 'Til death do we part, I do.

I march out of the bathroom with Vanessa nipping at my heels. “Oh,” she squeals, “I napped while you did your business and am now rested to begin our honey...”

“Shush now while I call my true love. Do you know what quiet is, sweetheart?”

“Your true love?”

Who knew that Vanessa could have such a tiny voice? I punch in some numbers on a cell phone and place my fingers on Vanessa’s lips to silence her.

“Uh...,” she says.

I snap my teeth and she mews.

“Hey, it’s me.” My voice always goes husky sexy when talking to Barbie. “Are you alone, my darling?”

I wink at Vanessa and mouth the words, “Don’t cry.”

“How about a little phone sex, Barbie? Give me a minute, okay?”

I cover the speaker of the phone and whisper in Vanessa’s ear, “Get out, and do not come back to our room until you hear from me or I’ll blacken your eye.”

I uncover the phone. “How can I forget you, Barbie? You know how much I love you.”

Vanessa blows her nose on her wedding veil, wiping the mascara from her cheeks. “What happened to the man I married, the man I should be honeymooning with, instead of you having phone sex with some other woman? If you really cared about me, you’d get me some frickin’ sunscreen.”

I grab my brother’s bride by her hair and fling her from the room, locking the door.

“Well, when you gonna leave Bubba, huh?” I yell into the phone.

We begin arguing like always.

The more heated our argument, the hotter I become. I am about to bust my Elvis pants.

Barbie is moaning and groaning on the phone. With all the Viagra Bubba has stocked up, there is still no way that old man will ever satisfy my woman. I might just go insane with lust for the hottie who pants on the other end of the line, about 1800 miles away. No woman can do phone sex like Barbie. She could make a killing as a 1-900-Icangetyouoff.

Barbie sounds like a banshee when she cums and ends *her* dirty phone session by asking, “Have you heard from Jayden lately?”

Oh, no, there I go shriveling up again. “The battery on my cell phone is dying,” I scream and hang up on her.

Vanessa enters the suite, waving a room key she must have gotten from the front desk. “Ah, why did you have to break the lamp?” she whines and then starts singing, “Your cheating heart will make you weep...” blah, blah, blah. “Are you getting the hint, Jayden?”

With my *Superman* strength, I could break my brother’s wife in two. The quiet, more useful bottom half would belong to me. Jayden could have the upper half, including her tonsils and lungs.

Chapter 43

BRAD

Married life is spectacular if you are not really a husband. I lean back on my brother's office chair, clink my shoes on his desk and grin at the *I Want to Marry Elvis Wedding Chapel* eight-by-ten photo of the happy bride Vanessa with her groom. The smiling couple stands on each side of the Elvis Presley minister who has an arm around each. The photo brightens up the gloomy decor of Jayden's boring office.

"You need some more family photos, brother." Talking to pictures of Jayden, makes me feel closer to my brother. Okay, so I am really talking to myself because the one photo of Jayden in his office is of me assisting in the operation of one of his patients. I took my mask off to smile at the camera and streaked my cheek with blood. Other than my lovely photo, there are just boring medical certificates and medical books. Jayden's office is blah decor with nothing personal of the man to mark his office, until now—a photo with wedding bells sketched into the glass frame. I push a UPS tracking receipt of the wedding video that I mailed to my brother into the frame corner.

Jayden ruins my good mood by calling and screaming like a fishwife. "You married her! You married Vanessa, the woman you promised to break up with!"

"But..."

"You dirty bigamist!"

"It wasn't me who married Vanessa, Jayden. It was you."

"Quit confusing us! I was right here in Austin. I was not the one who dressed up as Elvis and married her, Brad!"

"Really, neither of us married her, Jayden. Elvis did. Elvis is her husband."

"You can go to prison in Canada for having two wives, Brad!"

“Let’s get one thing straight, Jayden; I am not going to jail because you are not really married to Vanessa. I did not sign the marriage certificate so the marriage is illegal, thus, there is no marriage. Vanessa is too dumb to realize we should have signed. The Vegas wedding is simply a joke on her.” I sang my last sentence to the *Wedding Bell Blues* tune, mimicking Vanessa.

“Quit laughing, jackass! How can you play such a cruel joke on a woman?”

“Hey, the minister thought it was a funny jest. I did you a favor, brother. Once Vanessa finds out the wedding was fake, *she* will break up with *you*.”

“End this, Brad, and soon. You are twisted, you know that?”

“Well, thank ya. Thank ya very much,” I say in my best Elvis impersonation.

Kazam! Jayden must have used a hammer on the *End Call* button. He did not even give me a chance to announce that his office staff threw a party to celebrate his wedding.

I whisper to his wedding photo, “I haven’t even opened any of your wedding gifts, brother. I figure you want the honors. I never bought you anything in Philly except a *Whiskey Sour* and an *AMF*. Remember how many *AMFs* we drank and each time, toasted our biological mother. We lifted our glasses of *AMF* and yelled out, *Adios Mother Fucker!* Well, at least I did. You are always the good boy, even to a mother who gave us away.”

I throw back my head and chuckle. I definitely want to go home so Jayden can fly back to Canada and open his wedding gifts.

Then my brother ruins my joyous mood again by calling back.

“And tell your Barbie doll to leave me the hell alone. She keeps calling,” he hollers.

“Now you are the one mixed up, Jayden. Barbie is calling *my* cell phone, which you have, and believes she is talking to me.”

“Yeah, then why does she say in a breathy voice, ‘Jayden, I’m free tonight. Let’s get together for a drink or two.’”

“And have you?”

“What?”

“Gotten together with my doll?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Brad. I’m just cooling my heels here in Austin waiting for you to keep your promise.”

“I’ll call when there’s any news.” Boom! I hang up on him and then urinate in a corner of Jayden’s office, the walls with the best view of Victoria. Having marked my territory, I milk the leftover drops from *Big Sam* and zip up my pants. My brother’s office is *mine* now.

Screw his practice, I am leaving the office early.

At a hardware store, I purchase a shovel using Jayden’s credit card.

I drive down the express lane with my carpool buddy beside me. The shovel is leaning against the front passenger seat wearing a black *Vancouver Canucks* hat with a silver visor that matches its mean silver spade face. The *Canucks* is a hockey team with a killer for a logo, an orca whale.

Jayden wants to end this farce. Well, I am sick to death of Vanessa and seriously thinking about going home myself, just hopping on a plane and surprising Jayden. The Canadian teenager I hired after firing Irene, Jayden’s old-bag receptionist, is incompetent.

I have become disenchanted about living *mi vida loca*. Really, I picked up some Spanish north of the border in Canada.

“Si,” I tell the shovel, “you and I, Señor Grave Lover, will play a prank on Monsieur Jayden.” Okay, so I mix up my Spanish with French, but then English is my second language since I am from Krypton.

My brother will have more than one shock waiting for him when he returns to Canada.

I flick on my turn signal and make a right onto the long driveway of the Jayden family farm.

July 31, 2015

BRAD

GRAVES ARE TOUGH TO DIG even with the most expensive shovel a brother's credit can buy. No one appreciates what I do, especially Jayden. I imagine my selfish brother lying in the shallow grave but the image freaks me out because we are identical. Believe me, it is no picnic being Brad O'Boyle *and* Jayden Tremblay.

It would be so much easier on my tired arms if it would only rain.

Do bones float?

Does anyone know about the flotation properties of skeletons?

Anybody?

Huh?

Because, really, this grave-digging shovel may be wearing a dapper hockey baseball hat but the spade is not talking. Why is it that all sports have baseball hats in like 21 colors, as if that makes any sense.

A plus about a shovel—the blunt tool does not have a big mouth like a dead woman.

Okay, now I am imagining Barbie in the grave staring up at the dark sky with doll eyes, glassy and unmoving.

The grave next to me is just the right size for Vanessa.

Seriously, 5500 pounds of dirt stuffed in her mouth would make Jayden's wife quit singing.

* * *

Part Five: Obscene Attraction

Chapter 44

JAYDEN

Brad phoned telling me he finally dumped Vanessa. I asked him for one more day, leaving out the fact that I was taking his wife to the Texas Doctors' Ball.

Note: Do not confuse sex with love. You are not losing your heart to your sister-in-law. There is no danger of falling in love with Ronni. Not likely. Not ever. Nada. You just feel sorry for her, poor pathetic thing never went to her prom.

For the ball, I wore a pair of cufflinks that do not belong to my brother. Ronni gave *me* the cufflinks as a thank you for inviting her. The cufflinks were *mine* even though the initials etched in gold read *BO* for Brad O'Boyle. She had no idea the cufflinks were her going away present to me.

The dinner and dance was in the Capital Ballroom at the Intercontinental Stephen F. Austin Hotel in downtown Austin. We danced slowly beneath a crystal chandelier. She looked stunning in a velvet black gown with her hair piled on her head and diamond studs in her ears. The earrings were my gift—*thanks for all the good sex, sister-in-law*. Technically, Brad's credit card paid for the earrings and his practice already paid the bill so he will never know.

I quit lying to myself during a slow dance to *Moon River*, one of the most romantic songs every written. I have been a logical man my entire life and the electricity that cackled whenever I was around Ronni, drawing me to her until my heart slammed against my chest, well it felt like ice poured down my back. When with her, I tingled with excitement in anticipation of tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow.

How can life ever turn out like a fairy tale for a tarnished prince like me?

No matter how many diamonds I might buy her, she will never forgive me.

Ronni must have mistaken my groaning for passion because she took me in her arms and pulled me even closer, held me even tighter, drawing me into her even more. She pushed her body closer, shoving her leg in between mine.

I dirty-danced right back.

Then we came together like two people in love, not just lust, in those sweet moments of dancing. *Witch*, I thought as everyone else in the room faded until we were the only couple. Everything moved in slow motion.

We made love in the back seat of Brad's Mercedes in the parking lot of the hotel with her black velvet dress hiked up around her knees and my pants down around my ankles. Car sex with Ronni was better than any sex I ever had at the swankiest hotel with any other woman.

I drove Ronni home with her head on my shoulder and her hand squeezing my knee.

I parked in the driveway, making an excuse that it was easier to carry her from the car to the front door. Yeah, I carried my sister-in-law over the threshold of the front door as if we just got hitched. I was suffering from temporary insanity, temporary because I would soon be gone, like tonight.

I whispered into her ear, "I'm sorry for everything that's happened in the past. I'm sorry if I hurt you."

"You're apologizing to me, Brad?" she said in a voice choked with tears. "You've changed, Brad. You are sensitive, kind, attentive, and a real father to our daughter."

I kissed her if only to make her shut up about what a great guy I was and to make her stop calling me by my brother's name. Fear and longing jumbled up my mind along with guilt. Even worse, my heart quickened whenever she entered a room. My senses were drawn to her every breath, step, and sigh. I swore I could even hear her heart beating. I just...it would be better if my sister-in-law stayed feisty instead of nice. Ronni made me feel vulnerable when she showed her gentle side. I felt like protecting her.

We made love again, at my urging and I prayed this dying feeling in my chest might go away, but it did not.

While Ronni lay sleeping beside me, I stayed wide-awake, making my plans. This time I must be strong enough to leave her for good because I was in way over my head. The scariest part of the night, when I lay in the dark listening for things that go bump in the night, I actually had the incredible thought that if my brother died, then no one need ever know.

It was best to leave Ronni while I was still sane because the thought of my brother dying flitted through my mind, teasing me for just a second, or two. I imagined the many ways Brad might die—accidents, food poisoning, heart attack, brain tumor, murder.

Moreover, I saw a vivid image of Brad in his coffin, only it was my own face and obituary, *Dr. Jayden Tremblay dead in Canada*, and Brad buried in my place.

The thought of my brother's death was appalling.

I had better leave while I could find something of Jayden Tremblay still in me. I could not spend the rest of my life pretending to be another man, faking my way through life just to bed Ronni O'Boyle.

If I left now, no one would get hurt. Ronni need never know.

I stayed a minute longer, listening to her soft breathing.

I snuck out of bed, stood on shaky legs, and leaned over her, softly kissing her forehead.

I could not possibly love Ronni; really love her, like in the real thing and not the caught-up-in-the-prom moment. My stomachache was just something disagreeable I ate at the ball. My trembling hands were due to buttoning my pants in the dark. My itchy, watery eyes, well that was allergies. Everyone gets what Austinites call *Cedar Fever* and I was certainly feverish, feeling as if the flu gutted me.

I tiptoed down the stairs to the basement and examined the rocking horse. It would not take much more to finish the horse.

My hand shook as I painted the face, and I had to keep wiping my eyes with my sleeve.

The thought of leaving Ronni barely made me flinch now that I tightened my jaw and set my mind to leaving, but the thought of not being able to see Traci grow up, well the pain was almost unbearable. Traci had become more than a niece to me. She had been my daughter for two months.

Children grow up so quickly. They sprout so many inches a year, lose their teeth, and get adult teeth. Their faces change. Will I even recognize Traci if I saw her ten years from now?

How could I even think of never seeing my daught...niece again?

For just a minute, the crazy thought fluttered through my mind for the zillionth time that maybe Brad could tell Ronni he found a brother and then I could come and visit.

Yeah, and see Ronni with Brad? Her husband? Your Brother? The two of them husband and wife! You stupid idiot! Get the notion out of your mind right now and forever. Ronni might guess the truth if she saw you and Brad together! My inner voice was right. There was no way I could pull off visiting without Ronni discovering our lies. I could never look at her as if she was just a sister-in-law and I had not made love to her in almost every way known to man. My lips had been all over her, branding her as mine.

But she isn't yours and never will be, especially if she ever learns the truth about how you made a fool out of her and what a liar you are, you despicable human being! No, you are an inhuman, unfeeling man!

You are wrong. I feel too much.

I shook my head to clear the cobwebs. There. The horse was finished.

I carried the rocking horse upstairs to Traci's bedroom and set the horse down at the foot of her bed. I still had a minute so watched Traci sleep. Her stringy hair stuck up from her head adorably as if she stuck her finger in a light socket.

I kissed her cheek.

She reached out a small hand, clutching the blanket.

I pulled the covers higher to her chin.

Traci stirred and I dreaded her waking. I would lose it to tell her good-bye in person and probably confess all my sordid sins to Traci. The last thing the kid needed was to be a sounding board for my sorry life.

Traci sucked on her tongue and fell back into a deep sleep.

I had no right to anything but a guilty conscience, yet I grabbed the picture of Traci on the nightstand.

I stood in the early morning dusk, the sun just rising. I stared at Ronni's sleeping face, memorizing the lines of her skin. *I will never see her again*, I thought. I dismissed the option of Brad dying. He was a healthy twin brother who would probably live as long as I would. We shared the exact DNA. Our hearts would probably stop beating at the same moment. There was a connection between identical twins, as if we shared one heart, one brain...one woman.

I daydreamed about my brother's wife, including her in my plans, thinking about how she might fit into my life. Well, I did have a life once upon a time. I had better leave before the next option possessed me, Ronni divorcing Brad.

I tiptoed out the front door, climbed into Brad's black Mercedes, and backed out of the driveway, headed to the Austin Bergstrom Airport and Canada. I retraced my wheels back to my beginnings when life was easier and emotions did not churn my stomach.

Barbie's gun was still in the glove compartment, and I did not want the hassle of explaining to Brad how I happened to have his girlfriend's gun. She must have more than one pistol because Barbie never called to ask me about it, or else the dingbat forgot where she left her gun.

Since 9/11 happened, lockers were no longer available to rent at airport terminals, so I pulled into a self-storage place located near the airport. Many locals rented drive-in storage units because it was cheaper to park their cars in them than to pay for long-term airport parking. I, of course, asked for a mini-storage unit and left Barbie's gun in it. I rented the space in both Barbie's name and my name and paid cash. My plans were to mail her the locker key, along with the address.

Brad arranged for us to switch at the Seattle airport. He was cleaning his nails and did not notice how cold I was to him. I felt like punching his face in. I rubbed his initials on the cufflinks Ronni had given *me*. At this moment, I felt unadulterated hatred for Brad. These last two weeks away from Austin seemed to agree with my brother. Brad looked rested and happy whereas I felt like never going back to Canada.

Brad slapped me on the back, seemingly not offended by my glittering eyes.

He walked to his gate with his chest puffed out, handed his ticket over, and disappeared from my life to board his plane to Austin.

An image came to my mind of the plane carrying my brother crashing to the ground. His identification burned in the rubble and no one but me knew that Brad was flying from Seattle to Austin.

Then what would I do—spend the rest of my life impersonating Brad O’Boyle?

Chapter 45

BRAD

Once again, there are roses in my house, but this time stuffed in the trashcan in the basement laundry room. My shirt is half-off, one sleeve on, the other sleeve off and I am stunned at the note with the flowers: *How about going with me to the dance Saturday night? A ball the doctors are having for charity?*

“What the fu...?” My brother asked my wife out on a date!

My nostrils flare at an image of Jayden and Ronni slow dancing, his hands cupping my wife’s butt, one hand holding each cheek, him lifting his hand up her skirt, and doing it right there on the dance floor, grinding *my* wife in front of *my* colleagues. Jayden is making a fool of me. I will never be able to show myself at another doctor’s event. Austin is *my* territory. Ronni is *my* wife.

I rip off my shirt, popping a few buttons, and stuff the shirt into the washing machine, swearing to wring my brother’s neck.

If Jayden did betray me with my wife, then what would stop him from sleeping with my girlfriend? If a wedding ring does not keep Jayden from respecting what is *mine*, then surely he must have... his phone calls and messages about Barbie wanting him—Jayden has been chasing after her!

The image is so repulsive, so distressing, but I have to know for certain, not about Jayden and Ronni, that can wait. The image of my brother and Barbie in bed, butt-naked, eats my insides like scorpions and tarantulas are chewing on my liver, green poison spilling into my veins. If Jayden touched her...if that stooge hit on Barbie...

“Calm down. Take a deep breath. Barbie would never cheat on me. She is a kidder, like me. Barbie has never really wanted Jayden. She loves *me*.” My brother is giving me an ulcer. I shove a fist against the middle of my ribcage and massage a ball of stress.

Oh, God, there is another ball bulging from my back and I drop to my knees and shove my head between my legs.

Jayden left behind a shirt with his initials JT stitched across the pocket. *Creep has to stamp his initials across everything he owns, everything I own.* I wanted to take a knife to those initials and rip out the threads and then slice across the shirt where his heart would be, but his shirt will come in handy.

I yank the shirt from the hangar and fling my arms into the blue shirt with Jayden's initials. It takes three tries to button the shirt straight

I almost trip over Traci on the stairs.

She jumps a step back.

"What are you staring at?" I growl, trying to control my temper and not transfer my fury from Jayden to my daughter. Her lip trembles at the initials JT on the shirt. "Boo!"

She screeches and runs down the stairs.

I secretly care for Traci but enjoy goading Ronni so I put the girl down occasionally.

Buttoning my suit jacket hides my brother's initials.

Ronni sits in the den as if waiting for me. No, my wife is waiting for my brother so they can bang each other on *my* floor in *my* house. No wonder she acted so nice on my last visit and cooked a steak for a romantic candlelit dinner. Hooker!

Ronni flashes a big smile, her eyes warm and cuddly.

I peer back at her, trying to melt her with my x-ray vision. "So how did you like the dance?"

She smiles lazily and crosses her legs so that her skirt rises up as if she is inviting me to...Ronni never invited *me*. My wife loathes *me* but now she is looking all lovey-dovey and starry eyed. "The dance was wonderful," she says in an airy voice and plays with her hair. "I had a great time, Brad."

You mean Jayden!

She rubs salt in my wounds. "I never knew you could dance. I still remember that night when we met at the bar how clumsy you were."

Now Jayden dances better than I do! Vanessa implied Jayden was better in bed than I was. My brother is heavy in bed and light on his feet. Is there no wonder at Jayden's talents? "Maybe it's you who's gotten to be a better dancer," I snap. "You always moved like you had no class but then I guess that just comes natural to you doesn't it?"

Her face falls. Ha!

"You even copulate like you have no class." I make a nasty gesture with my hands and hump my body. "Know what copulate means, you high school dropout or do you want to play charades again?" I grab the front of my pants.

Ha! Her face wilts.

The cunt deserves a slap for not denying she slept with my brother. If Ronni were innocent she would say, "How would you know how I copulate, Brad? I have not slept with you since the night you got me pregnant with Traci. Remember the night I trapped you into marriage?"

All of sudden Ronni is nosy and wants to know where I am going. I tell her bluntly that Barbie is meeting me.

Ronni goes berserk and slaps *me*, nearly scratching my eye out.

I storm from the house with her running after me.

My crazy wife jumps on the hood of my car, begging me not to go.

I am sorely tempted to put the car in drive and smash Ronni against the garage wall like a cheating cockroach. What is going on with her? She never attacked me before or cared what I did.

I jerk the car in reverse, slam my foot against the gas pedal, and roar out of the garage, headed downtown.

My archenemy, Jayden, has hurled a wad of kryptonite at me, which is blinding green, the color of pathological jealousy. All I can see is Jayden in bed with Barbie.

My shoulders are rounded and I am clutching my stomach, poisoned by kryptonite. Nobody notices me vomit on Sixth Street since drunks are

commonplace, especially college students who walk over from the dorms.

I stumble into The Blind Pig Pub and swallow a stiff drink for courage. Quick, I punch in a name on my cell phone.

I lose consciousness as my skin turns greener, waiting for Barbie to pick up the phone.

“Hello,” she answers.

I am having an out-of-body experience and speak as if in a tunnel. “This is Jayden, you remember, Brad’s identical twin brother?”

Oh, of course she does! How can anyone forget kind, gentle Jayden, the new-and-improved Brad?

Chapter 46

JAYDEN

Damn! Vanessa's pink Porsche was parked in my driveway.

"Vanessa!" I hollered and slammed the front door.

She ran from the back of the house and gave me a sulky look. She sported a black eye. "Oh, there you are Jayden," she said in a peek-a-boo voice. "You're late again. I told you to call me if you can't get home on time."

Be patient. She is not very bright. She does not take a hint graciously, like WE ARE NOT MARRIED! She is a rich spoiled brat whose daddy is a big shot politician in town who never told his little girl no. Vanessa thinks she can have anything she wants, including me.

I poured a whiskey on the rocks, sorely needing a drink. I was in no mood to deal with Vanessa Rathburn and her pawing, or crying.

She stroked the couch, purring, as if this was her den, her house.

I grabbed the bottle of whiskey and it slipped through my fingers, crashing to the floor. My mouth dropped open at a marriage certificate. The *signature* on the marriage certificate resembled mine. Brad swore he never signed the certificate; therefore, the marriage was not legal!

I clutched the whiskey glass in my hand and the glass shattered, cutting my palm, dripping blood through my fingers, staining the white carpet. A life with Vanessa would be hellish with her forever singing her little ditties, ordering me what clothes to wear.

"You know, you should cut your hair like Elvis." She smiled slyly and giggled. "I made you an appointment with my stylist, Jayden. Surprise!"

"No. No. No. No!" I dropped my face in my hands. I had to get out of here and not breathe the same oxygen. The house was not big enough for the two of us.

I scurried to the bedroom and Vanessa followed. She was breathing down my back.

I skidded to a halt. What in hell happened to my bedroom? Vanessa painted the walls lavender, filling the room with flowers and teddy bears of all colors. Two heart-shaped pillows were on the bed. The white heart had the name *Vanessa* stitched on it. The red heart had the name *Jayden* stitched across the silk material.

“I had them made special, just for us.” She sat on the bed swinging her legs.

I can't...I can't...sleep on that bed. The bedspread was embroidered with hearts, our names, tulips, cherubs, ruffles, and other high-school girly crap. Vanessa was 30 going on like 13.

A thick flowery-smelling perfume emanated from the mattress, stinking like a funeral. The mattress would have to be fumigated or thrown away. My gorgeous, masculine mahogany bed—the stench of Vanessa’s perfume probably soaked into the four posters, rails, and headboard, ruining the wood.

“Get out of my way!” I pushed Vanessa aside, ran into the bathroom, and vomited. I hung my head over the toilet, praying to Our Lady of All Shitheads. *God help me! The law believes I am married to Vanessa. Are you punishing me for sleeping with my brother’s wife?*

The bathroom cabinets contained hair spray, curlers, shower cap, makeup, and nail polish, everything Vanessa needed to make her beautiful.

She used my new razor to shave her legs! I would have to buy another razor, or grow a beard. If I stayed a moment longer in this house with her, I would slit her throat with the old razor.

OH MY GOD! The trashcan was stuffed with pregnancy tests, all confirming that Vanessa was pregnant with Brad’s baby!

I bundled some bathroom stuff in my arms, marched out of the bathroom, and threw the toiletries on the bed. It was now Vanessa’s bed. She was welcome to the bed in the divorce settlement. My stomach turned

—Brad conceived a child with Vanessa in that bed, a child Vanessa would claim was mine.

I began throwing clothes and toiletries into a suitcase.

“What are you doing?” she said in a brooding voice. Vanessa was dumb but she knew a suitcase was used for travel, or as storage for extra lingerie that will not fit anywhere else because a woman liked to shop ’til she dropped.

Look at this! Will you look at this! My suits and shirts were shoved in a corner, wrinkled to make room for Vanessa’s clothes. This house had four bedrooms, but Vanessa could not count higher than one. She should have used another closet, but no, romantic Vanessa believed that having our clothes hanging in the same closet was like having the two of us hanging out together, the clothes making love to each other or some such nonsense. Silk rubbing against linen. Cotton cozying up to nylon. Denim seducing satin. She actually got off by talking about our underwear touching each other in the dresser drawer.

Yep, her panties were mixed up with my *Comfyballs* shorts.

“Move out of my way, Vanessa, so I can finish packing.”

She stood in front of the closet door with her arms stretched, blocking the exit to the closet. “What are you going to do? Blacken my other eye?”

“I don’t hit women, Vanessa.”

“Well, how did I get this then, dip shit!” She pointed to her eye.

“I didn’t...” *Brad hit you but surely, it was an accident.* Knowing Vanessa, she fumbled into his fist. Vanessa was annoying but to hit a woman was disgusting. I now pushed her out of the way, gently.

I sat on a suitcase, snapping it shut. “Fine, I have enough clothes. I’ll pick up the rest some other time.” I draped some suits over my arm up to my chin, and picked up my suitcase. “Move from the doorway before I run you down,” I growled.

Vanessa jumped back to let me pass and then beat my back with her fists. “Don’t think for one minute you can leave me, Jayden Tremblay. I

have been covering up your abuses but if you leave me, I am going to Daddy. I swear...I swear to not divorce you, ever. The newspapers will find out you're a wife beater."

Vanessa's screams turned to gobs of crying and hiccups. Brown mascara swirled down her cheeks, mixing with rouge as bright as her fuchsia-colored Porsche.

I stopped at the garage door and gave a heartfelt sigh, hanging my head and nearly sobbing. Vanessa did not deserve this. "We were married under extenuating circumstances. I am not your husband, Vanessa, I never was."

She composed herself long enough to take her high-heel off and throw it at me, barely missing my eye with the heel, but the shoe scraped my ear.

"We haven't even opened our wedding gifts," she screeched.

Oh, my God, it finally dawned on me. I did sleep with Vanessa on my first trip back. I used protected sex, which is not always fool proof. I leaned against the wall for support. "When are you due, Vanessa?"

She was only a few weeks along. I sighed with relief and said, "For the record, the baby you're carrying is not mine."

"Who do you think I am, the fucking Virgin Mary?"

Her other shoe hit me on my shin. I yelped, hopping on one foot.

To hell with her father or any newspaper exposure. I refused to stay in this house with Vanessa. I was not her husband, Brad was. *Bigamist*, I thought and stormed out.

It was easier for me to abandon my house to Vanessa than to kick her out. She would only come back, maybe with a loaded gun.

Well, she could burn down my house for all I cared.

I backed the car out of the garage with a cool head, given the bad day I was having.

Make that bad life.

Chapter 47

BRAD

So now, I am in Austin pretending to be Jayden who is supposed to be impersonating me. While waiting for Barbie to answer her phone, I examine my bag of purchases from the BDSM store—some rope, choky slave collar, silk ties, a Wartenberg wheel with matching violet wand that zaps electricity, a gag, and whip. Ha! Barbie wants my brother, a kinder, gentler Brad.

BDSM does not turn me on, but role-play is fun. Normally in the bag would be a *Superman* suit, one enhanced in the genitalia region.

“Hello, Barbie,” I purr into the phone. “Bet you can’t guess who this is.”

“Brad?” she hisses, “are you insane calling me on my home line?”

“This is Jayden.” I drop my Texas accent. How cool the lie comes. After impersonating my brother for several months, I sometimes believe I am Jayden leading a double life like a secret double agent.

Her voice does not sound surprised at Jayden’s call and her tone is welcoming, unlike before when she thought it was me on the phone. It takes all of my control to grip the handle of my mug and not throw the beer across the bar.

She lowers her voice to a sexy, breathy tone, sounding as if she is licking the phone. “What do you want, Jayden?”

“I can give you more than vanilla sex, Barbie. I’m not boring like my brother.”

“Brad is a bit of a bore after all these years. You’re a sensitive shy man, unlike that animal Brad.”

Damn her to hell! She called *me* an animal! I will show her how much of an animal my brother really is! “Let’s get together, now. Where do you want to meet?” My teeth are grinding, making holes in my molars.

“There’s a hotel on Oak Knoll Drive.”

I nearly scream into the phone, *that’s our place you cheating twat! How can you do this to me, and with my brother!*

The phone rattles in my hand. “I can hardly wait.” *Bitch!*

“Your voice is shaking with lust. You are so horny for me I could eat you. Mm, you’re hard like in Brad’s office. Then, that other time, I opened my legs and showed you my wet cupcake. Yummy, I want your frosting, Jayden. Spread my cupcake! I drive you crazy with my hand. Mm, I’m rubbing it! Uh, uh, uh, my cunt is pretty in the picture I just texted you. Lick my icing, Jayden! You’re about to burst your britches for me.”

“Uh-huh,” I moan and glare down at my pants rising up like a tent. *Big Sam* is addicted to phone sex.

“I’m fingering myself, Jayden, shivering with anticipation. I’ll wear the sexiest, shortest, low-cut titty dress I can find.”

I swallow, closing my eyes and groaning. “Make sure the dress is red,” I rasp out and have no need to scribble down the address she recites.

Chapter 48

JAYDEN

The Fairmont Empress was located at Victoria's Inner Harbor. The hotel on Government Street had the look of a castle. Vines grew along the exterior, inching up nine stories giving it a European look.

A reservations clerk took my Visa card to charge a suite.

"Sorry, Sir, but this card has no more credit left on it."

My limit was \$50,000.00 and my balance had been zero before Philadelphia. My brother had struck again.

I furiously began writing out a check.

He touched my hand, stopping me. "Sorry, uh, Dr. Tremblay, but we do not take checks." *Especially yours*, his voice implied. *You appear rather ragged hugging your suits*. The clerk lowered his nose a bit. *Expensive suits*. His nose went up in the air again. *Stolen perhaps?*

I rifled through my wallet for enough money for one night's rest. I was ten dollars short. "Do you have an ATM machine?" Brad had no access to my cash accounts, and I had plenty of money in the bank.

The clerk pointed to a corner of the lobby.

I dragged my clothes over to the ATM machine, pushed in my card and punched in my pin number.

Oh, geez, the bank's computer was down.

I did what any man would do who finds himself in need of money. I pounded my head with my cell phone and then dialed. "Uh, Dad, this is Jayden. Can you loan me some cash or a credit card? I'm at the Fairmont Empress."

"I was about to eat dinner, son. Come join your mother and me, and bring your wife, too," he said.

Suddenly, it was all too much to bear. I had to tell somebody what happened these last few months, someone I trusted. I was almost crying. “It’s an emergency, Dad. Please drive over to the Fairmont Empress. I will buy you a curry dinner at the Bengal Lounge. There are some things I need to tell you, just you.”

Click.

I dragged my clothes and suitcase over to the Indian restaurant located at the hotel, piled the clothes on a couple of chairs, and waited nervously for my father. The predatory expression of a life-size stone Bengal tiger in the lounge reminded me of Brad.

Staring into the depths of a murky *White Russian* made with too much Kahlúa, my thoughts drifted to Ronni. *She likes her hamburger well cooked, almost burnt. She loves Queso with chips and drinks diet cokes.*

I pulled out a prescription pad and wrote.

1. Don’t ever think of Ronni again.
2. This time get absolute proof from Brad about him fixing the Vanessa problem.

I chewed my lip, thinking maybe the time had come for *me* to deal with Vanessa.

No, no, I could never. This had become too big a mess, no thanks to Brad. I could not possibly...Ouch! To confess to Vanessa that I had...that me and Brad...she was pregnant with Brad’s baby and Brad already had a wife!

3. Avoid Vanessa.
4. Important—change the locks to the condo.
5. Tell Brad...

Dad pulled out a chair and slapped my back, startling me.

I slammed my pad so it was upside down on the table. I squeezed my father tightly, feeling like an eight year-old boy again. *Daddy*, I longed to

cry, *fix my life. I have been a bad boy.* “Long time no see,” I said instead, clearing my throat as men do when hiding their emotions.

He gave me a curious look. “Jayden, I just saw you yesterday when we played a round of golf. What’s so important for you to drag me away from your mother and her roast sablefish?” The sound of his voice implied, “this better be good. You know how I love your mother’s roast sablefish.”

I wished to be a kid again, sitting around the table eating dinner with my parents instead of confessing to my father. I began at the beginning, leaving out graphic intimate moments between Ronni and me, and the fact that Vanessa was pregnant.

“Well this explains a few things like why this impersonator, Brad, acted different than you at times, such as placing a high bet with Buddy at golf yesterday. Your mother and I thought maybe you were on drugs, but I must say your confession doesn’t take away much of my concern.”

“I’m worried, too, about Ronni.”

“Brad’s wife? I know she’s your sister-in-law, but you don’t really know her, do you?”

“She is a wonderful woman,” I said defensively.

“Brad’s wife should not be any of your concern, Jayden.”

“But...”

“Your first business should be to have your bogus marriage to Vanessa annulled. Your mother and I were surprised you up and eloped like a wild teenager. And when you brought your wife over, we felt hurt that you never introduced her before.”

I could not hide the embarrassment from my voice. “Yeah, well, Vanessa pretty much drives me crazy. I planned to break off with her when I came back from Philadelphia and then Brad, well you know the rest.”

“The agency we adopted you from never mentioned a twin. If they had, we would have adopted the two of you and then maybe...”

“Do not say Brad would have turned out more like me. I am no better than Brad, Dammit! Look what I did to Ronni.”

“Playing a trick like that on a woman, I feel ashamed for you, Jayden. You two may appear identical, but there are distinct personality differences from your upbringings. Poor woman must think her husband developed a split personality.”

I played with my food, hoping the floor would swallow me.

Dad nearly choked on his food. “Did you sleep with your brother’s wife?”

“I couldn’t help it,” I said to my broccoli. “I am...was obscenely attracted to her.”

“She’s a married woman for heaven sake! You’ve got to tell this woman, your sister-in-law, the truth.”

“I can’t. Ronni would hate me.”

“So?”

“Well, she would.” *So there.*

Dad could still make me squirm. “I’ll think about it,” I mumbled, “when I go back to Austin while Brad annuls his marriage to Vanessa.”

“Mrs. O’Boyle isn’t the only woman who was duped and made a fool of by you and Dr. O’Boyle. Vanessa needs to know the truth, too.”

“No way am I going to confess to Vanessa. Brad married her. She is *his wife.*” *And the father of her unborn child.*

“But you allowed your brother to impersonate you. She would not have been conned into marriage by him without you switching identities in the first place.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll think about telling her about Brad.” I looked down at my plate, unable to look my father in the eye while lying to him. I changed the subject. “I was a dumb trusting ass leaving my credit card with Brad. He maxed out my card and I have no money to pay for a room here or for dinner,” I muttered.

He expressed with his eyes and stiff lips what he thought. "Come home with me then and you won't have to borrow any money."

"I need some time by myself where I can think. Mom will smother me at the farm."

I clutched my suits to my chest, my suitcase balanced between my feet while Dad paid for my suite.

"There you go, Jaydie." Dad slapped the room key in my hand. He used my little boy nickname to make me feel like a small man whose parents had to pay his way.

The best way to battle my father's passive aggression was to shower him with love. I hugged him. "Thanks, Daddy."

He wiped his eyes with the backs of his hands. "You haven't called me Daddy in years, son." He greased my palm with some extra cash, emptying his pockets.

I now sat alone on a sofa in a suite, twiddling my thumbs. On the table was the picture of Traci in pigtails with her face tilted and a big smile on her face. Stamped on one cheek was a purple star made of glitter. Her eyes were big and wide. Little hearts were sprinkled around the five-by-seven frame, just like on her pajamas this morning. Traci was all heart, like a soft cuddly kitten.

My face was reflected in the glass of the picture, appearing as weary and haggard as I felt. Hopefully, Traci liked the rocking horse, Willard. The name was odd for a horse but Traci had shrugged her shoulders and said, "Horse just looks like a Willard," which was odd since Willard did not have a face yet when she named it.

I shifted my eyes to the window, to the Inner Harbour of Victoria but the beauty of the harbour faded. Brad promised while swearing to God that he would break it off with Vanessa. Thanks to my brother, Dad now had a sordid image of me.

I dialed Brad's cell phone number, but there was no answer. I tried the house. *Come on, Brad. Pick up. Answer your phone. Do not let it be...*

“Hello?” Ronni said into the telephone.

She must hear me mewling. It was tempting to take the coward’s way out and confess to her over the telephone. She would scream at me, but I would not have to see the disbelief on her crushed face or hatred glittering from her eyes. She would slap my face or worse if I revealed the masquerade in person.

“Hello?” she said again. “Can I help you?”

Yeah. You can help me. Come over to the hotel and keep me company. I want you. I need you...I... Click. I hung up the phone before voicing the words. I rubbed the phone to my forehead, trying to erase all images of Ronni.

Crap!

I threw the phone across the room and the phone bounced on the bed. The two glass French doors leading to the bedroom were open; else, the phone would have busted the doors.

I would just have to wait and get hold of Brad at his office tomorrow to see how he planned to straighten up the wreck he created.

What about your wreck! You plowed into Ronni’s headlights and she never saw you coming.

Yeah, headlights, her tits. Her ass, her...

Quit thinking about sex! Your cock is what got you into this mess!

Perhaps Dad was right and I should just come clean with the truth, face to face with Ronni.

You first, Brad. I imagined my shithead brother standing in front of me, his fists blocking his face. Tell Vanessa that you already have a wife, you low life bigamist. Confess to Vanessa while I blurt out to your wife...

And tell her exactly what? That I slept with her pretending to be her husband?

To have sexual intercourse with a woman under false pretenses meant she did not consent at the time of penetration, which must constitute some

sort of rape in some court of law. Ronni might just slam my butt in jail.

How would my parents like visiting me in prison?

Note: Do not ever call Brad's house again! Ever!

Chapter 49

BRAD

Barbie's truck is parked at the motel—tramp could not wait to get here. She called ten minutes earlier. "Hey, lover boy, I'm in room number nine, Jayden. I can't wait, handsome." I about break my foot, stepping on the brake in the parking lot.

I guzzle a few more gulps from a whiskey bottle. *I can't wait, handsome.* I feel like ripping the steering wheel from the dash.

I slam the car door, storm up the steps, take a deep breath, and knock gently. *Remember, you are Jayden the sweet Brad.*

"Enter," Barbie yells.

I shove open the door.

"You sure are anxious, hunk. For a second there, I thought you were going to break down the door to get at me." She purrs deep in her throat and stretches like a feline.

Barbie lays on her stomach, a short red dress riding up her thighs, her legs swinging behind her. She leans on her elbows and her boobs spill from her dress, giving me an eyeful.

No, you fool! She is trying to seduce your brother with her tits. Cunt is giving Jayden an eyeful.

Either anger, lust, booze or all three cause me to sway on my feet.

Goddamnit! Get hold of yourself and find the strength to carry through.

"I told you we would only have a couple of hours, but now I'm thinking we can go all night," she says with sparkling eyes.

Barbie never spent the night with me since she married, since I married. The lamp on the table whacked across her head would knock her unconscious.

Jayden would ask about her husband so I do.

She answers, “Bubba thinks my mama’s sick and needs me. Mama promised to cover for me. Ah, you brought your pajamas” She giggles. “We don’t need PJs, just our birthday suits, Jayden.”

My brother’s name sounds yummy in her mouth. “These are not pajamas but toys.” I drop the leather bag on the television. Clunk. The bag lands on the wood like a brick.

“Ooh, are there sex toys in the bag? You are a surprise. Want me to do to you what that strumpet is doing in that porno?” She winks at the dirty movie on the TV and spreads her legs. “I’m better than that vixen on TV.”

Barbie rises like a cobra from the bed and walks in a slow sensuous gait. With each swing of her hips, I can hear the ocean crashing against a beach.

She wraps her arms around my neck and rocks into me.

My arousal grows along with my helplessness.

She fingers the letters JT on my brother’s shirt. “Jayden, I’m so glad you called. I knew you wouldn’t be able to forget me.”

“Was it so memorable last time?”

“You know, sugar, that day in your office.”

Jayden did it to *my* lover in *my* office. They were humping against *my* chair, *my* desk, *my* couch. They rolled around *my* carpet, their legs twisted together like pretzels. They shoved against *my* door thumping against the wood, her skirt riding her hips and Jayden with her legs wrapped around his waist and his...

She reaches down and grabs me, moaning.

I nearly swoon and damn myself for wanting her.

“You’re hungry, Jayden,” she whispers in my ear with a throaty laugh.

She stands on my toes, tonguing my brother in the ear.

I walk my hand up her bare leg, slipping my fingers beneath her skirt. She is wearing no panties! I slide my palm across her rear because she rubbed oil on her naked buttocks. Really, the lying cheat oiled herself for my brother.

She shudders and groans from my fingers walking up the line of her butt.

Wham! I slap her across her rear so hard it must burn as if a bee stung her, as if ten bees stung her.

She groans even louder. "You like the rough stuff? You seem like such a shy sensitive man but there is an animal simmering beneath. You're growling like you're about to explode."

I clamp down on my cheek, moving my jawbone furiously and tasting my own blood.

She cocks her head, her eyes roving my face. "I do believe you are a little bit better looking than Brad."

I yank out a pair of silk ties from the shopping bag. Both ties are red to match her dress. The color red is the mark of a prostitute like red light districts.

Barbie bends completely over to unbuckle her heels and her short skirt inches up past her rear.

I rub the front of my pants. I have an insane thought that Jayden is here with me and both of us can have her at the same time. In Philly, we slept in the same bed with two naked women, one for each of us. Barbie could sleep between us, both of us pressing against her, both of us shoving our tongues in her ears, running our hands down her breasts.

And then, I would smother my brother and my girlfriend with pillows while they slept, one knee over each, stuffing their noses with cotton, keeping their mouths closed to let no air in.

I rip the zipper down her dress, yanking the garment from her shoulders.

Barbie is proudly standing in front of Jayden naked, her hands on her hips. Her chest is thrust out, her legs parted. She is showing off for my brother. *My woman. My lover. Mine.*

“Lie down, Barbie.”

“I just love a man who gives orders,” she purrs. She grabs my hand, cupping my fingers on her crotch. “I’ll have you begging for it just like Brad does.”

She rocks squeezing her thighs together, trapping my hand between her legs.

My arousal is painful and her seduction fascinating. Barbie is every inch a predator and I bite down on her thigh to get her to release me.

“Ouch! Not so rough,” she says, brushing at the blood on her leg.

“Now reach out your arms and legs.”

She spreads like a human sacrifice while I tie her ankles to the bed with scarves and bind her wrists with sisal rope.

“Ouch, the rope is scratchy,” she complains.

“I’m going to punish you with pleasure.”

“Ooh, is that a slave collar?” She leans her head to one side for easier placement around her neck.

“And what shall I do to you, Jayden?” She speaks the words with a tongue thick with lust. Her eyelids are heavy with passion. “Let me see you,” she moans.

I kick my pants across the room and pull my brother’s shirt off.

Her eyes are glued to my undershorts. She pants and mews, squeezing her legs together and thrashing her body wildly on the bed.

She is whimpering for Jayden and I have not even touched her! She humps the bed covers, moving her big rear like an ocean in the middle of a storm.

A doctor designed the Wartenberg wheel to test nerve reactions. The wheel has sharp pins for rolling across the skin. I plug in the violet wand, which emits electrical pulses, and roll the wheel across her body simultaneously zapping her with electricity. Unfortunately, the wand is not strong enough to electrocute her, and she is enjoying the sensation of pin pricking and zapping.

“Why did you stop when I was so close?” she rattles in raspy breaths.

She tries to kiss me, but I bang my head against her collarbone, avoiding her. I pinch her thighs. “You want pain, huh?” I squeeze her nipples.

Her head bangs against the headboard, the rope cutting into her wrists. “Stop, you’re hurting me!”

I grab her cheeks with my hands and shove my face at her so I am spitting into her mouth.

“What...?”

I shut her up by covering her mouth with my hand.

“No condom,” I rasp. “I’m going to feel you skin to skin this time.”

Her eyes are wild.

I ram into her, painfully, hurtfully.

I grunt on top of her, my face strained and I don’t stop pounding, pinching, and squeezing her, until I collapse on top of her, not bothering to cushion her from any of my weight.

Red bruises are on her thighs. One hip is purplish.

“Give me a moment to recover my stamina, so I can go again. Only I’m going to flip you over so you don’t enjoy any of it!”

“You selfish bastard,” she screams and struggles to hit me, but she is tied to the bed. “What if you got me pregnant? Bubba had a vasectomy.”

I yank her hair back and lower my face to hers. “Look at me!”

She pushes her head into the pillow and mews. “My God, your eyes. You look like a monster. Untie me,” she pleads. “You’re crazy, Jayden.”

“You won’t be able to walk when I’m through with you.” I rub the muscle spasms on her thighs and roughly massage her bruised breasts. “Ah, so now you’re whimpering in pain and not lust.”

“You’re hurting me,” she whispers.

“You want gentleness?” I take the whip from the bag.

“You wouldn’t...you couldn’t...You are Brad’s brother, a doctor, a man of healing.”

“The whip is just a sex toy, but first, I have to shut you up.”

I try to stuff a silk tie into her mouth and she bites me.

I squeeze her neck, choking her and push the tie down the opening of her throat.

“A dozen lashes for biting me. Ah, come on, quit crying, baby. The slaves in the South had it worse. There, no more whipping, see,” and I drop the whip. “You want sensitivity? How’s this?” I slam my fist against her jaw and the bone crunches.

“You prefer my brother!” I scream at her.

Finally, there is an *oh-shit* recognition in her eyes.

“You come sniffing after Jayden like a bitch in heat!”

I land my knuckles on the bridge of her nose.

Crack.

She blacks out.

I throw a glass of water in her face and she comes to sputtering. I pull the gag halfway out so she can get some air.

“You were out for less than a minute so don’t look at me like you just died.” I point a jagged kitchen knife at her.

She opens her mouth to scream, I guess, but her jaw is broken.

My body shivers at my reflection in the mirror. I hardly know this man, this baboon who grins from a flushed face, hair sticking up from his head like a zombie. *Oh God, why did she have to bury me?* Tears stream down my cheeks. “Why do you hurt me like this, Barbie?”

She pulls at her wrists but I, a former Boy Scout, knotted the scarves.

The knife shakes in my hand. Who turned up the damned heat? I am sweating an ocean here. “You want my brother so I’ll give him half of you, put your body parts in a box, and ship you to Canada.”

She moans.

Blood is smeared across her face. Her jaw is black and blue, and her face swollen. A spot of blood where the knife nicked dribbles down her neck. Her tied wrists are bleeding and her ankles are raw.

“Fight me and you hurt yourself more.”

She pushes herself further into the mattress, making me laugh.

“I only want to kiss you, my love.” My lips flutter across her broken jaw. “See. I can be gentle. You cut me in two, sweetheart.” I take the knife and slice it down my chest, drawing blood. “See. My wound hurts more than yours do.”

I yank a mirror from the wall and carry it over to her. “You can thank Jayden for making you ugly. It was him you were so excited to meet, remember?”

She stares in horror at her broken jaw, nose smashed in and lip split in two.

“My brother won’t ever want you again, no man will, not even Bubba.”

She cringes then closes her eyes, and leans her head, exposing her jugular vein. Barbie is vain and would prefer death. Tough luck. I drop the knife in the shopping bag, along with the other sex toys. “You won’t dare tell Bubba it was me who beat you up. How would you explain meeting me

at a motel, huh? Pretend you were abducted by bikers who brought you to this room to gang rape you.”

I laugh at her pathetic attempt of trying to kick me with her ankles tied.

I wrap my brother’s shirt around her neck and squeeze tightly. “Better yet, tell your husband Jayden Tremblay from Canada visited Austin and beat you to a pulp.”

She wheezes and I remove the gag. She tries to speak but only manages to mouth the words *I hate you*.

“I should kill you for that, but I’ll let you live so you can see how hideous you are, you cheating slut. You look dirty and cheap, like a whore no man would care about, like some sex object, a thing.”

I believe to be cured of Barbie until I sit in my car and ball like a baby.

Chapter 50

BRAD

I wipe my eyes with Jayden's shirt and then speed away headed in the direction of Pace Bend Park northwest of Austin. At Pace Bend are limestone cliffs overlooking Lake Travis. The tallest cliff is 45 feet above the water.

I sit on the front seat of the car and push the power button so that the seat reclines. For a man about to commit suicide I am mindful of my comfort and punch the power lock on the doors to insulate the car from any terror lurking outside.

There is a crack in the moon, down the center. The two halves fit perfectly like Jayden and me. With any luck, my brother's heart will stop beating when mine does.

The phone rings.

Barbie is calling to apologize! *Sorry, I got a little crazy, honey, and did not mean any of it. I want you. I need you. I love you. I never wanted Jayden.*

My voice is hoarse. I answer like a little girl, "Hello."

A stranger calling with a wrong number, and uncaring of your problems, is a sign that you should go through with killing yourself.

I stand on the edge of a cliff staring down at the ripples of the water in the moonlight. Over the years, several people have fallen to their deaths from atop the cliffs. Given how low the water currently is, I shall have to be careful not to land on a rock and break my neck. Drowning would be less painful.

The lake is black as a tunnel and it seems a hand reaches from beneath the surface of the water. Perhaps a mermaid waves at me. There are Sirens beneath the sea, singing to me to join them. It will be calm at the bottom of the lake. I really do not mind fish nibbling my body, and then parts of me will come back, fished from the ocean. I can be deep-fried and

broiled, baked and caked. Cajun seasoning and lemon pepper are among my favorites.

I sway on the ledge, cool air sobering me, wondering if committing suicide over an uncaring woman is worth the trouble. My brother will not come to my funeral for who will tell him I died. The only other person who knows of our masquerade is Barbie, and she may never speak again since I punched her larynx as a parting gift.

I had better think this through—Jayden and Barbie together at *my* funeral. My brother comforting *my* girlfriend during *my* eulogy, both of them standing at the podium to broadcast how they both made a fool of Brad O’Boyle.

Over *my* dead body! I will not give those two animals the satisfaction of killing myself. Plus, if I die, what if Jayden returns and pretends to be me?

This time of year, the sun does not set until about 9:30. It is around 9:15 p.m. and I am the only one here. A setting sun is soothing, giving one hope that *tomorrow is another day*. I am in a *Gone with the Wind* moment, feeling melancholy.

There is a rustling behind me, and my hair rises at the nape of my neck. I earlier threw the knife into Lake Travis just in case Barbie decides to press charges. My only defense from an intruder is a ballpoint pen in my pocket. The *Superman Gel Pen* could stab an animal in the eye.

A shadow of a human looms above me.

“What the...?”

Hands shove against my back and push me.

I hurl head first towards the dark depths of Travis Lake.

August 23, 2015

JAYDEN

SOMEONE DUG UP MY PET CEMETERY, exhumed the bodies from the graves, and then put up a sign marked *Boner Zoo*.

There is no proof but this is the sort of sick joke Brad finds hilarious.

My stomach churns as I rebury the remains of my animals using the same shovel as the culprit. Dirt flies around me, and there is a baseball cap on the ground so I shove the hat on my head to keep the dirt from my eyes.

I blink my eyes at an empty grave, imagining Brad with his eyes wide-open, buried alive, scratching at the dirt, and silently screaming.

Ronni would be free.

Stop any murderous thoughts about your brother right now! The culprits might have been neighborhood teens or a fraternity hazing by college kids from the University of Victoria.

If only my brother would call back. His phone rings and then goes straight to voicemail.

I thought of calling Ronni to ask for Brad, but do not trust myself to speak to her.

His office has not heard from Brad either. It has been three days.

The thought churns through my head that if anything happened to Brad, I could return to Austin.

* * *

Part Six: Promises Kept

Chapter 51

BRAD

Splash! Plop! Ka-pow!

I float to the bottom of Lake Travis. Luckily, I am still in *Superman* mode and can breathe under water.

People are careless. At the lake bottom are a lost cell phone, wallet, wedding ring, and camera.

There is a nice pair of sunglasses stuck in the mud. Whoa, now it is pitch black with the glasses so I throw them back to the sea. The pair is missing an arm anyway.

A largemouth bass jumps at me with its mouth open like the big fish plans to swallow me like Jonas in the Bible. I imagine Bubba Simpson fishing the bass out, cutting the fish open and me springing at him. The shadow of the man who pushed me resembled the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man from *Ghostbusters*. Bubba followed his wife and then me.

I am running out of air and my survival instincts kick in. I shed my pants and swim to the top, my head bursting from the water.

I claw my way up the cliff, slipping and sliding, kicking a pebble or two, and gaining inches until I crawl along the top of the cliff, away from danger.

Leeches cover me. Most leeches feed on decomposing corpses, making me wonder if I drowned. My skin is white in the moonlight and maybe I am a ghost. Ha! I will head to Canada and haunt Jayden.

Frickin' bloodsuckers are trying to eat me so I must not be dead. I dig a fingernail into my skin to remove some slimy leeches. The popping noise from the leeches as they release their suction on my skin is nerve wracking.

I must be allergic to leeches and resemble an actor in a horror film, soaking wet with my legs covered in bites. Red blotches have erupted on my skin. My face has a rash, and my legs wobble like a drunkard.

My breathing is raspy. An antihistamine might save my life.

Someone has stolen my car!

Luckily, my cell phone is still at the top of the cliff but there is no one I can call for help.

I stick out my thumb and hitchhike.

Even I would not pick me up.

Yet, there is always a Good Samaritan, usually a bubbly nerdy type with glasses and potholes on his face, and red hair sticking up from his head like an ice cream cone. He swerves his car onto the shoulder; pops open his door and yells at me. "Climb in."

The nerd jabbers as if I am his best friend. Coincidentally, he carries a pharmacy in the console of his car. He offers me an antihistamine and a bottle of water. "The pill will make you drowsy," he advises in a sinister way. The good Sam-aritan may actually be a *Son of Sam* type and a serial killer who drugs his victims with cough syrup and allergy pills. He is driving around Pace Bend Park at like five in the morning. He does not even ask me where my pants are but glances occasionally at my *Superman* undershorts that have a couple of dead leeches clinging to the crotch.

My wallet is in my stolen car, but I found a wallet fished at the bottom of Lake Travis belonging to a man who the news had broadcast killed himself. His twenty-dollar bills will pay for a cab home after Samaritan Herman reaches his destination. He smiles like Opie Taylor from *The Andy Griffith Show* and turns down a twenty for his drugs.

Ah shucks, Pa, I was half-hoping he would kill me since the leeches have failed to suck all my blood out.

The weirdest thing about the nerd giving me a ride is when he asks if I have any *live* leeches on me to add to his pharmacy. "A dead leech won't do me any good," he says and shifts his eyes to my crotch again.

I nod off to sleep while Opie lectures me on maintaining a clean lifestyle.

Beethoven's Ninth Symphony wakes me. Yellow goo on my lashes have glued my eyelids and I rub until the sun shines through the front car window. Through the fuzz in my brain creeps the night before in Technicolor. I groan slamming my fists against the dash. Too much booze mixed with sniffing drugs makes me crazy.

My cell phone keeps playing *Beethoven's Ninth Symphony* with persistence, going into the fourth movement. Barbie must be ringing to apologize. Surely, we can make it through this burp in our relationship. A man knows he is nuts about a woman when he thinks about her as *She*. *She*. *She*, as if *she* is the only woman owns the pronoun. I will let her speak first and then apologize. We will make up. I will offer to go back to the motel and fix her up. Damn! I should have brought a medical bag with me. Opie's Drugs and his pair of first-grade scissors would not even help a scratch.

I flop open the passenger mirror, one of those vanity types that lights up, and straighten my hair. Clothed in just my underwear, I feel undignified. "Give me your pants and another antihistamine," I whisper to Opie. "Make that two allergy pills." Only half my rash is gone and my skin appears freckly or like an alien spawned me.

Quick, I pick up before the call transfers to voicemail. I hit the answer button and clear my throat. My mouth tastes like fish feces. My vocal cords wobble like a pussy.

A voice sounding like me barks into the telephone, "You owe me \$49,321 Brad! I want that money transferred to an account I have set up. Got that?"

"O-kay." My voice sounds as blistery as my face. My brother does not even tell me good morning. He just bitches as usual.

"I want that money today. I'll check this afternoon and see if you've transferred the money and if you haven't, Brad..."

"What are you going to do? Huh?" I stick my chest out, spoiling for a fight.

"You son of a bitching liar! You did sign the marriage certificate! Well I do not want a wife! Get your butt back to Canada, Brad, tonight, and

tell Vanessa the truth and annul your marriage.”

My voice sounds cooler than I feel, as if I am in control even though the cell phone shakes in my hand. “What about you messing with my woman, huh? I warned you not to touch Barbie!”

“I never touched your mistress.”

Pharmacy drugs fuddle my brain. Last night at the hotel, Jayden was with Barbie. *Stay calm. Be nice for now until your head is clear.*

“Disclosure, Brad. You never told me you have a gambling problem when you vomited your life to me in Philly.”

“Not a problem really, a vice, a little vice. I have been trying to abstain ever since my mother rescued me financially from my last scrape. I might have lost my house if not for good old Viola. I fell off the wagon, big deal! There is nothing wrong with having fun now and then.”

“You do have a problem if you’re gambling with my money. Is cocaine a vice too or are you an addict?”

“I only take antihistamines now.” I keep the sulkiness from my voice and smile in a groveling manner. “Fly over and take my place in Austin while I straighten out your boring life in Canada. I have patients, too, you know. Besides, you and I shouldn’t be seen in the same town together.”

“Agreed. We shouldn’t be seen in the same town.” He says this as if any town would be too small for the two of us.

“My last appointment today is at one. I will catch the first plane out. I’ll e-mail you my travel plans,” I say.

“Bring plenty of cash. I’m not exchanging credit cards this time.”

“I’m subtracting from that \$49,321 the good times you charged on *my* credit card,” I say mockingly to my goody-goody two shoes brother, holier-than-thou Jayden. “The amount is what, a dollar for bubblegum?”

“You charged a lot of vice on my card, Brad. Casino charges. Prostitutes. Massage parlors. Tattoo parlor. Porn DVDs not rented but

bought. An escort service. Dirty on-line subscriptions. Credit card charges that might be drug-related...”

“Cut the laundry list, mother. Don’t judge a brother until you’ve walked in his shoes.”

“I have walked in your shoes, Brad, and you have a sweet daughter and a nice wife in Austin.”

“Okay, stop right there. You really have no idea how a wife and kid can tie you down. Ronni is a low-class slut who screws every man she sees except her husband.”

Jayden hangs up on me without even saying good-bye.

I riled you up brother, by putting down Ronni. Interesting.

Opie drops me off at the office.

As bad luck would have it, my staff has all come in early today. My rash appears as if an alien spawned me, and I strut past them in my undershorts, dried mud stuck to my rear and a dead leech clinging to my crotch.

I keep an extra pair of pants in my office but unfortunately, there is no extra pair of *Comfyballs* so I work with my boys hanging loose and flopping about, even more liberating.

Barbie mentioned stirrups and Jayden with the same breath.

There is a landscaper outside the office and I borrow his tree saw and hack the examining table with the stirrups to pieces.

I then carry the splinters out to the parking light and light a bonfire.

Really, this is all therapy, part of *Anger Management for Dummies*, a downloaded ebook.

To the bonfire, I add the picture of Jayden and me taken together at a Philly bar, both of us holding up our *AMFs* in a toast.

Adios Mother Fucker!

Up in smoke!

Chapter 52

JAYDEN

Brad was quick to pay off my credit card bill and restore my credit.

I had the urge to tell Ronni about Brad, the drugs, the other women, and his bride Vanessa. Instead, I retrieved the wedding picture of Brad and Vanessa from my office wastebasket and shredded the photo.

Ronni will think Brad and I are two peas in a pod, I thought with disgust.

The thought of Ronni hearing from Brad about our switch caused my stomach to somersault. I ran into the bathroom and threw up.

I have been vomiting a lot lately from a nervous stomach. *Oh, the tangled stomachs we weave when we practice to deceive*, or some such Shakespearean quote. Our trading places were both comedy and tragedy. I wiped the bile from my mouth and spit dramatically into the sink.

Maggie, the woman who handled insurance claims, stuck her head in the bathroom door and said in a cold voice, “Your wife is on line two, Dr. Tremblay.”

“I told you that I don’t want to speak to Vanessa, ever.”

Maggie gave me a dirty look and left the office door open. “There, there now. Don’t cry, sweetie,” she said loudly into the telephone.

I walked into the reception room to get the files on some patients and the women in the office all raised their eyebrows at each other. Maggie shook her head as if to say, *the honeymoon is over and our boss acts just like my ex-husband*.

I gave the women a dirty look right back and slammed the door to my office.

I brooded as I so often did lately. There must be a way I could soften the blow when confessing to Ronni.

I dropped my forehead on the desk. My father was right and I deserved the pains in my stomach. It was my duty to my brother to make sure no harm came to his wife and yet I screwed her big time. I could not help myself because she enticed me with her sensuality, personality, and sense of humor, not to mention her looks. Almost from the very first, she attracted me like a moth to a flame. "It's your fault," I planned on telling her. Ronni would probably hate me forever, but I promised my father to come clean and tell her the truth. I ruthlessly rescheduled my patients to meet Brad's schedule, determined to face Ronni.

My laptop pinged with an email from Brad and the travel arrangements to meet up in San Francisco, the airport of our first meeting point. Our masquerade had come full circle.

I practiced several speeches and in each scenario, Ronni runs from me.

I chase her until she has nowhere else to run, and corner her at a deck of the Oasis Restaurant overlooking Lake Travis.

My sister-in-law turns and smiles at me, beckoning with a finger.

I walk over to her with open arms and a loving smile on my lips.

Ronni falls into my arms and kisses me forgivingly.

She spins and shoves my back against the railing, and then hurls me into the depths of Travis Lake.

I groaned, pounding my head against my desk. If I'm going to feel so damned guilty about my sister-in-law, maybe I should just bang her again before confessing and she kicks me in the balls for deceiving her.

Anyway, I am damned if I do screw her again and damned if I don't.

Oh, God! What will she think of me when she learns the truth?

Chapter 53

BRAD

At the San Francisco Airport, I greet Jayden especially nice, even though he bumps into me on purpose.

My brother steps back, clenching his fists.

I laugh at his childish antics. “You look like you want to hit me. Chill out, brother, and admit that the Elvis wedding was a riot. I must have watched the DVD like nine times.”

“If the wedding ceremony was so funny, why did you hit your bride, Brad? Did you give Vanessa a black eye before or after the honeymoon?”

“Give me a break. You know how irritating your wife can be singing in that scratchy voice of hers.” I slap an envelope into his hand. “Proof I deposited the money just like you asked. I always pay my debts.”

Jayden slips the envelope into his pocket without opening it to confirm the deposit.

“Ah, you already checked with your bank. Money shouldn’t come between us, Dr. Tremblay.” Disappointment resonates in my voice because deep down inside I always wanted a brother and had longed for this to work out between us.

“You proved to be untrustworthy, Dr. O’Boyle.”

Now he is going to deliver a boring lecture about me firing Irene and hiring a teenager barely out of high school. I grin, ready with a retort about juicing up his boring life.

“Vanessa is pregnant with your baby,” he hisses.

I clutch my chest and stagger. I am about to have a heart attack and Jayden does not come to my aide! He is going to let me die at the San Francisco airport!

“What do you plan to do about Vanessa? Divorce Ronni and make your marriage to Vanessa legal?”

“The kid’s not mine,” I snarl and snatch my brother’s travel documents from his hand. “Don’t worry about Vanessa, dude. Brad is here to fix everything so you can come back to your humdrum life in Canada.”

Jayden slaps me between the shoulder blades so hard that my chest caves in. “Call me when the deed is done. Take my advice, tell her the truth. Get an annulment or you just might be charged with bigamy.”

Did my brother just threaten me?

“Vanessa’s father is a hot shot in Vancouver who would slap your butt in jail if he found out what you did to his little girl,” he adds. Jayden spins and marches towards his gate.

I flip a finger at his back and give a diabolical laugh. Okay, so I am a drama king and like special effects. Ka-pow! I was going to warn him but ha-ha, let my brother deal with whoever is trying to murder me in Austin. If Jayden dies, I have a life mapped out in Canada and an assumed name, Dr. Jayden Tremblay, only, what to do about Vanessa? She is like one of those bobbleheads you stick to a car dash. Like Jayden, the thought of being married to her makes me want to scream.

The problem of Vanessa is still unsolved when I unlock the door to Jayden’s apartment. Thankfully, she has moved out, giving me time to think.

On Jayden’s nightstand is a picture of *my* daughter Traci.

Someone has left a nightstand drawer open and thrown a couple of other photos on the wood floor.

One picture is of Ronni and Jayden at the Texas Doctors’ Ball, making me wonder if my wife is the reason Vanessa has left Jayden. She must have found the picture hidden in the drawer.

Another picture confirms my theory that Ronni and Traci have somehow come between Jayden and Vanessa. The picture is of my brother, wife, and daughter at Sea World in San Antonio. Jayden is holding Traci in his arms and grinning at Ronni who smiles shyly back at him.

Okay, so now my brother has taken over my family. Creep wants what I have instead of being happy with what I have given him, a wife of his own, and a baby on the way.

I punch in Vanessa's phone number and conjure my kindest Jayden voice. "I want you back, sweetheart. The pictures you found, well I discovered a twin brother. Brad is the one in the photo posing with his family."

"Oh, I thought the child was yours," she says in a gullible voice.

"There is only you, Vanessa."

I hold the phone away from my ear. "I'm coming right over so we can celebrate!" she sings.

Two wives I can juggle with the experience of a man with a wife and mistress for six years, but *two* screaming brats?

Think! Think! An annulment would have been easy but not to a pregnant woman.

What to do? What to do?

Vanessa's car drives up and I run into the kitchen and hide.

Chapter 54

JAYDEN

At Brad's office, I was nervous about confessing to Ronni this evening.

Just blurt the truth out about how you duped her, made a fool of her, and violated her person and trust in the worst way possible.

I had picked a public place for my mea culpa. She would not kill me in front of witnesses, especially if she was drunk, wined, and dined.

I cancelled the late afternoon appointments because my stomach twisted in knots, my old phobia about confrontation. I went to the gym and pumped especially hard, hoping to wring the anxiety from my tense muscles.

I paused the treadmill and rubbed my eyes, sighing deeply. Last night I confessed that I was not the man she thought. When Ronni asked me who I was, instead of telling her the truth, I concocted the oldest lie known to man—if at a loss for words, say you love her so she'll go easy on you when she learns you are a fraud. I had no idea what love meant. The only certainty was that if we showed up at the restaurant in two different cars, then we could leave separately if things did not go well.

Brad's cell phone rang and I answered, "Dr. O'Boyle."

"Cut the Dr. O'Boyle bullshit, Dr. Tremblay. It's me, brother." Brad sounded in a happier mood than yesterday. "Just wanted you to know that I got rid of Vanessa for you. You can come home now, Jayden."

"How did you ever manage so soon?" I squeaked.

"Just be happy for small favors, old man. Vanessa is out of your life for good." Brad laughed. "I should add, your annulled wife," and he made a karate chopping sound, "will never bother you again. You can thank me later. By the way, I am waiting for my plane right now and booked a flight for you, even paid for the ticket myself. I owe you after all the trouble I put

you through, marrying Vanessa and all. You better get going to the airport so Ronni doesn't see us together in Austin."

"Ronni?" I screeched.

"I'll text your itinerary. We will rendezvous in San Francisco for our finale. See you tonight." Click.

With one phone call, Brad spoiled my intimate dinner with his wife where I planned to fess up. I did not have a good feeling about leaving. A vision of Brad slipping his wedding ring from his finger, dropping the gold band on a plate and showing Ronni how our masquerade began, sent ripples of anxiety up my spine.

Then I panicked and decided to drive to Brad's house and confess the truth to Ronni this instant.

I dialed the house but no one answered, ditto for her cell phone.

I thought of wandering around the university in the hopes of bumping into her.

And where exactly is her class, you moron? The logical voice in my head pissed me off.

What should my next step be? Allow Brad the opportunity to patch things up with Ronni? Try to break up my brother's happy home? Confess to Ronni before Brad made up with her?

Think. Think. Think. How do I handle this? Just fly back while Brad is home, ring his doorbell and say, "Hi, Bro. I have some unfinished business with your wife."

What if a loving couple answered the door, their arms wrapped around each other, smooching?

Mostly though, I was more scared of what Brad might do if he found out about me and his wife. It was better for all if I just flew back to Canada and stayed there. In the end, I chickened out about confronting Ronni, as was my signature or MO when it came to dealing with women. I headed towards the airport, relieved to be avoiding an explosive threesome.

I was again on a flight back to Canada, my doomsday flight. I sat slumped in first class, imagining Ronni waiting for me at a restaurant, looking at her watch, her face red with embarrassment.

I munched on airline peanuts practicing what I would have said. "Hello, Ronni, I'm your ex-husband's brother. You do not know me, but you *do* know me. We have shared many intimate, loving moments. The sex was good and the company. We have a lot in common, sort of. Well, Brad for one."

Yeah, I was creative. I mixed my own *AMFs* on the plane, a miniature each of rum, tequila, gin, and vodka mixed with a splash of 7-Up in a water bottle. There was no Blue Curacao liqueur on the plane so I made do with Triple Sec which is a Curacao liqueur only clear in color, nothing a few drops from a blue fountain pen wouldn't fix, if you're drunk enough to not mind the taste of ink. There was no Sweet and Sour Mix either but a hard sourball candy shoved in the bottle substituted.

"Adios, Ronni," I toasted and swallowed my fourth *AMF*, which became a hallucinogenic. Ronni actually appeared on my lap on the plane.

"I want you to get to know me, the real me, not the pretender to my brother's marriage," I slurred at her.

"I do know the real you," she moaned and wiggled her butt against me, pushing her rump into my crotch.

I grabbed her hips, pushing her more tightly against me until the throbbing became so painful I felt like drilling her on the airplane seat, regardless of the other passengers.

My fingers slipped beneath her skit. "What do you like?" I groaned in her ear and kicked off my shoes.

She began to unbuckle my belt, flicking her tongue in my ear and whispering, "Having out-of-this-world makeup sex on a plane could get us arrested, Brad."

The plane hit some turbulence and pouf, Ronni vanished.

A flight attendant, a burly male, handed me my shoe. “Throw your shoe across the aisle again, and I’ll deck you,” he said, showing me a hairy fist.

I shoved my chin at him, egging him on to hit me. Even the imaginary Ronni called me Brad! She probably stomped out of the restaurant by now, a place where I would have shown her that I was not such a bad guy. But now...now....*Crap! I should have called her instead of standing her up. Come on, hit me,* but the flight attendant refused to beat me up. I ordered another miniature, yelling at him to “Mind your own business. I’m not frigging drunk!”

Then it hit me with sobriety that surely an annulment must take awhile. Brad must have pulled a few strings.

Yeah, it happens. I never said that my brother was not connected.

Chapter 55

JAYDEN

Brad seemed genuinely happy to see me. “Let me buy you a drink,” he offered. “There is a bit of a delay for both our flights.”

I dragged my feet to a bar where we both ordered drinks.

“How did it go with Vanessa? She must not have given you much trouble,” I said.

“Vanessa is an angel,” he answered.

“How did you manage to get an annulment so fast?”

Brad cleared his throat. “The U.S. Embassy helped pull some strings for me.”

“I didn’t know the embassy ever got involved in marital disputes.”

“When was the last time you went to your embassy for help?” he said, sounding defensive.

“Never.”

“I rest my case. Do not look so glum, you are a single man again. Let me buy you another drink. Ah, come on, you have time for one more, who knows when we will see each other again, brother. You’re going home to your empty house and I’m going home to my loving wife.” He locked his eyes with mine and I tried hard not to squirm. I looked away first and finished off my drink, coughing and choking because I drank so fast.

Brad patted me on the back and then rubbed my shoulders. “So did Ronni ever talk about me?” he said.

“Talk about you? Ronni thought I was you, bro. Why would she talk about you to me?”

“O-kay,” he said, as in *have it your way*. “Ronni thought you were her husband the whole time you were sleeping in *my* bed, didn’t she?”

“*Your* bed has got a loose spring that poked me in the middle of the night right here.” I rubbed my lower back.

“Really, I’m surprised you didn’t find a more comfortable bed then to sleep in while you were living in *my* house.” Brad smiled coldly.

“I suppose I could have slept in the guest room,” I mumbled.

“There are two guest rooms.” Brad banged his empty glass on the table. He stood up to leave. “I’m glad you told me about the loose spring. I’ll be sure and sleep with *my* wife tonight.”

I spilled my drink, the whiskey splashing across the rim of the glass.

He narrowed his eyes at me. “I’m sick to death of separate bedrooms and decided to give it a go with Ronni again. I forgot how good she is in bed.”

I raised the glass of *AMF* to my lips.

“Your hands are shaking,” he commented.

“Well, I’ve had too much to drink.”

“I wonder why.” He crashed his glass of *AMF* against my glass. “Have a good flight.” Brad grabbed me by the neck, and kissed my lips.

Yeah, I saw *The Godfather* movies—sleep with the fishes, Jayden.

“Hey,” I yelled at his back, “you’re limping.”

He turned and chuckled. “I kept my promise to you and got kicked for my efforts.” He waved and disappeared through the gate to board his plane to Austin.

I had no right to be upset. Brad had every right to sleep with his wife.

With a wet paper towel, I wiped my pale face that stared back at me from the bathroom mirror. *Better get back to Canada, Jayden. You have patients to see.*

I lay back against the plane seat, closed my eyes, and tried to sleep, but all I could see was Ronni’s face.

Chapter 56

JAYDEN

Vanessa's pink Porsche was parked in my garage. So Brad dumped her—not by a long shot.

There was an eerie silence in the house.

Maybe she is meditating, I thought.

“Vanessa?” I hollered out.

There was no answer.

Perhaps her car could not start and a friend took her home.

In the den, a talking *Toy Story Woody* bobblehead doll wiggled its head from a fan hitting it, causing the head to talk, saying repeatedly, “This town ain’t big enough for the two of us.”

I snorted, Brad and his jokes.

There was a faint sound of music playing from the master bedroom.

I pushed open the door and flicked on the light.

What the...?

I swayed on my feet holding a hand to my stomach. *Oh, God! No. No.*

Vanessa lay on the floor soaked in a pool of blood. Her eyes stared up at the ceiling. The killer had spread her mouth into a gruesome mask to make it look as if she was laughing.

The murderer had spread her arms above her head. In each hand, he placed a heart-shaped pillow, in her left a pillow with the name *Vanessa* stitched on it and in her right hand a pillow with the name *Jayden*. The killer had stabbed the *Jayden* pillow and some of the cotton was in Vanessa's hair.

A video played on the television set hanging on my bedroom wall. The video was of Brad standing over Vanessa's dead body. He had set up a

camera on a tripod and filmed himself stabbing her repeatedly. He was bare-chested.

Brad killed Vanessa in the kitchen and she screamed, dragging her body across the floor, trying to get away from him.

Oh, God, in the video she is screaming my name!

Brad smiled for the camera as he lifted the dead Vanessa in his arms. He carried her into the bedroom, leaving bloody footsteps.

He then clothed her in her wedding dress.

He went to the closet, got a shirt, and put it on, leaving the shirt unbuttoned.

He walked closer to the camera, pointing to the initials on the shirt, moving in for a closeup. The initials on the shirt were mine!

Brad flipped off the camera, a subtle message for me.

Music accompanied the video, a song playing repeatedly on the DVD player—a song from the album *Make Them Die Slowly* by a group named *White Zombie*. The song was called *Revenge* and the lyrics blared:

Revenge is better than love.

Frankenstein was built for you.

But he must be destroyed.

Cut him down yeah in his prime.

And let the party begin.

Police sirens wailed down the street, and I grabbed a red *Spiderman* mask from a dresser drawer. I was adlibbing it—the killer in the video was my identical twin.

I pulled the mask over my face and ran to the car.

I roared out of the driveway, with me disguised as *Spiderman* behind the wheel.

If I could make it to the ferry and across to Seattle, there might be a chance. My passport and wallet were still in the car in my carryon bag.

I pressed the pedal to the medal.

I had no clue what to do once I reached Seattle, drive to Austin, and kill Brad probably.

August 27, 2015

BRAD

OH, MY GOD, ONLY IN CANADA! Not only are police cars chasing my brother, but Mounties on horseback clip clop across the highway, adding to the sound effects of a television at the Austin Airport. “Sh,” I tell the crowd standing near the screen. “I’m listening to this.”

A female broadcaster is speaking on CNN: “This is the most bizarre police chase since OJ. A live feed from Victoria, British Columbia, Canada shows a man wearing a Spiderman mask speeding in a Mercedes. He is believed to be Dr. Jayden Tremblay, a suspect in the murder of his newlywed, pregnant wife.”

Really brother, Spidey, an arachnid is the best you can do?

During my stints in Canada, I never once saw a Mountie. Seeing some in red now bouncing in the saddle, wearing *Smokey the Bear* hats, and going after my brother, is like a dream come true.

Only you could have prevented this forest fire, Jayden!

A Mountie is pointing some sort of staff at my brother’s car, like a pool stick. Pow! The Mountie is going to scratch my brother into a corner pocket.

Jayden’s flight from justice must have interrupted a parade. The Mounties are all carrying staffs. They are going to beat Jayden to death with sticks.

Jayden, having grown up on a farm, is a horse lover. Dumb ass slams on the brakes rather than slamming his car into a horse. Really, and he was so close to jumping his car onto the ferry and escaping to Seattle.

Mounties quickly surround Jayden and then shove him up against his car with two guns pointed at his face. They unmask him and arrest him for murder.

A fat mustachioed detective spins my brother around and frisks him while his partner, a big-bosomed woman with sideburns reads Jayden his

Canadian arrest rights.

They cuff him and drag Jayden over to a Victoria black and white police car.

My brother's white face stares out of the window in shock.

Okay, the fun is over. I have proven to Jayden that I am a man of honor and a promise is a promise. I vowed to rid him of an unwanted woman. I have kept my word and he must now face the consequences.

I grab Jayden's leather bag from the luggage carousel. The bag contains a souvenir from Canada, a bloody knife. Quick, I rip off the paper identification the airline slapped on the bag with my name on it.

I sling the bag across my shoulder and pop my earplugs back in. I swagger towards the airport exit, feeling pretty good about myself, while listening to some lyrics from my new favorite song *Revenge* by *White Zombie*.

Another cosmic monster spits his teeth in your eye.

More dead than alive.

Revenge is better than love.

* * *

Part Seven: Oh, the Web We Weave

Chapter 57

RONNI

Mr. Hyde is back with a vengeance, and I am too scared to ask any more questions about the bloody knife in the travel bag Brad brought home from his recent trip.

He slouches in the den his brooding face staring at the television like a zombie. He drums his fingers on his head, mumbling to himself and then barking at me or Traci. He eats in, mostly TV dinners, leaving the empty trays in the sink for me to throw away, the hypocrite—he screamed at Traci for leaving a toy in the den. He threw Pussy against the wall for leaving cat hair on the carpet. My daughter's hair is thinning and so am I; my belt buckle has a new hole poked with a screwdriver.

This morning in the basement while helping me sort the clothes for the wash, Traci pats my hand. "Don't worry, Mommy, he'll be back."

"Who'll be back, Traci?"

"My daddy."

"Your daddy didn't go anywhere, honey. Your daddy is in the den reading the morning paper."

Traci vigorously shakes her head no. "My daddy will come back with more flowers. Daddy left his clothes, see." Traci points to a white shirt on top of the laundry basket.

Someone else's initials are on the white shirt. Besides, Brad's initials are never stitched on his shirts, his towels yes, because he does not want anyone using his towels.

Traci caresses with her finger the letters JT.

"J T," I mumble. J might stand for Jayden, the name Brad called out in his sleep last night claiming he was Jayden. JT could stand for *Jayden Tremblay*, the same name on Brad's travel bag, the one with the bloody knife. The name had a *Victoria, British Columbia* address.

The color drains from my face—the shirt has specks of blood!

Oh, my God! There is a pair of jeans stuffed in the washing machine with blood on the legs, lots of blood.

Traci spins in the direction of the basement stairs and says, “Come on, Victoria.”

“What did you say, Traci?”

“About what, Mommy?”

“Why did you say Victoria? Why would you say that name, Traci?” It feels as if a spider dances up my spine as I wait for her answer.

“Oh, Victoria is the name of the baby seal daddy gave me. See.” She holds up a stuffed white seal.

I am chasing goblins and laugh self-consciously—Brad is limping. He must have cut his leg or stabbed himself while cutting a steak, hence the blood on his pants.

“So your seal is a girl, Traci? How did you figure that out?” I smile at Traci. She has such an imagination.

Traci shrugs her shoulders.

“Then why name your seal Victoria?”

“That’s her name, Mommy. See.” Traci pushes her seal at me and points to a tag hanging from the rear: *Victoria Airport*.

The laundry room spins around me. Brad never said he had business in Canada. True, nowadays with the internet one does not have to physically travel to purchase stuffed animals from other countries. However, another curiosity is the travel bag with the words *Air Canada* embossed on the leather and in the little plastic window the name *Jayden Tremblay* with a Victoria address.

Perhaps Brad picked up the wrong bag at the airport.

Traci skips up the basement stairs.

I continue separating the wash and empty several of Brad's pants pockets. There are crumpled tissues, chewing gum wrappers, the occasional change and a prophylactic or two that irritates me. I never minded Brad's in-case-I-get-lucky rubbers before but we actually had a physical relationship for about three months. I am more furious with myself than with Brad for trusting him.

A pair of Brad's Levis has a picture in the pocket. My jaw drops open at a photo of two Brads. There is a bronze *Rocky* statue in the background, proving the picture was taken in Philadelphia. Two men are standing, one on each side of the statue. One man is a happy-go-lucky, carefree Brad. The other Brad looks a bit more serious. One Brad wears a dark blue shirt. The other Brad is dressed in a yellow shirt. One Brad wears a wedding ring. The other Brad's ring finger is naked. One Brad is laughing, and the other Brad is sort of looking at the camera in surprise.

One of the Brads has the look of the man I have been married to for over six years. He appears cocky and cruel around the mouth with a defiant look in his eyes as if the world owes him. The other man has a more sensitive mouth, kinder eyes, less cockiness, and a caring demeanor about him.

One man appears to be a dark soul and the other man a light soul. Jekyll and Hyde.

"What are you looking at?" Brad stands behind me and I nearly jump out of my skin. He was quiet walking down the basement stairs, as if he tiptoed to sneak up on me.

It is suddenly freezing in here, and goosebumps erupt on my skin. "This picture was in your pocket."

Brad snatches the photo from my cold fingers and grasps the picture so tightly, a fold forms at the end. He stares intently at the photo, appearing sad. "Remember how I always wanted to clone myself?"

"Yes."

"Well, I did."

The news recently bragged about successful cloning of sheep, kittens, etc. and claimed even human embryos have been cloned. The embryos were then destroyed after producing stem cell lines. Even embryo cloning has not been used for reproduction purposes and of course, a man cannot clone himself as a full-grown man.

“You’re joking, Brad.”

“Do I look like I’m laughing, Ronni? The cloning was done with computer software,” he confesses. “Two of me was superimposed in this picture at the medical conference in Philly where a company demonstrated the technology.”

“Well, it’s not really cloning then. It’s a trick.”

My comment starts a fit of giggles. Brad doubles over with laughter. “A trick. Good one, Ronni. It was a trick.” He wipes tears of laughter from his eyes, looking happier than I have seen him in a long time.

He then rips the picture in two and shoves both ends at my face. “Which man do you prefer, Ronni?” he says in an ominous voice.

I shudder from the look in his eyes. *How to answer him? Which answer will get me in the least trouble?* “I’m unsure. I don’t think I really know either of you.”

“Good answer.” Brad walks away, chuckling.

There is an evil sound in his laughter, making me glad that I forgot to ask about the initials on the white shirt, the Victoria Airport tag on Traci’s stuffed seal, and the Canadian travel bag with the bloody knife.

Chapter 58

JAYDEN

Officer Big Boobs and Detective Pencil Dick were facing me down for the murder of Vanessa.

Mental note: Quit thinking of the officers as Big Boobs and Pencil Dick or you might call them that to their faces. Remember, Big Boobs is Detective Frisco and Pencil Dick is nicknamed Lead-Belly. Resist the urge to punch the fathead in the gut to test his nickname.

These two geniuses did not believe that my chemistry was getting in the way of my innocence. “You’re lying about an identical twin,” they snarled with spit in their words.

“The judge turned down your request for bail, Dr. Tremblay,” Frisco drawled. She imitated a Texas twang, making fun of my alibi. “So you were in Texas at the time of your wife’s murder? Prove it, you lying sack of shit!”

“The fact that you ran proves you are a flight risk” he said in a high-pitched voice. Between the two of them, she had the balls. Lead-Belly wiped his forehead with a tissue and breathed heavily.

My eyes kept drifting to his suspenders, which had the same *Canucks* hockey team logo as the baseball hat left at my pet cemetery. The detectives concluded that I was lying about my crazy twin brother digging up my pets, too.

“We know that the first thing you’ll do, if you post bail, is to leave Canada for America under the make-believe of helping this supposed woman you claim is your sister-in-law.”

“But since your dead wife was an only child and you don’t have a sibling, how can you have a sister-in-law?”

“My twin Brad is married to Ronni, and he married Vanessa,” I insisted for the umpteenth time.

Frisco rolled her eyes to her partner. “Here we go again with my twin brother killed my wife.”

“Uh, really his wife.”

“Uh, his second wife.”

“Uh, his illegal wife.”

“Uh, my brother is a bigamist.”

“Uh, my brother is the star in the video killing my wife.”

“Vanessa was never my wife. I wasn’t even in the country at the time of her murder,” I repeated in a weary voice.

“Sure looks like your handwriting on the marriage certificate.” Lead-Belly pretended to jerk off. “Ha, you’ve been spermed,” he said, laughing.

I clenched my fists and leaned back against the chair, the cheap plastic squeaking. My lower back felt like needles were pricking it, and my skull pounded against my scalp. I rubbed the stubble on my face. I was dead tired, lacking sleep because whenever I closed my eyes, a vision came to me of Vanessa floating in a pool of blood. In the closet was a white coffin with squeaking hinges, causing my skin to crawl. Ronni stared up at me from the coffin with lifeless eyes.

My heart beat faster and I sounded desperate, “You’ve got to arrest Brad!”

“Your twin brother you impersonated?” she said.

“Yes!”

“Is there anyone on the planet who can confirm that you were in Austin at the time of your wife’s murder, any living soul who can corroborate your story, Dr. Tremblay?” he said.

“In Austin everyone thought I was Brad, and Vanessa was not my wife!”

The detectives plopped their dirty shoes on the table and dunked donuts in cold coffee. “Even the internet doesn’t have any information on a Dr. Brad O’Boyle in Austin, Texas,” they both blared out.

The detectives refused to look further than a quick internet search of Brad's existence. He must have hired a professional to wipe any mention of him off the internet. I brooded at a cup of strong black coffee Frisco earlier brought me. The word GUILTY was engraved in white letters on the black porcelain.

"And is there any proof from the airlines that Jayden Tremblay ever flew to America in recent weeks?" She chewed half a donut, spitting out sugary glaze.

"I told you before and this sounds suspect, but I flew under my brother's name."

"Dr. Brad O'Boyle." Lead-Belly wheezed when he said the name.

"How do you expect us to believe a cockamamie story like yours, Dr. Tremblay?" Frisco yelled. "Admit to killing your pregnant wife!" She threw the rest of her donut at the wall.

"Shame you wasted half a donut, Frisco," he said. "My partner here is going to lock you in your cell and throw away the key. Confess and save us all some grief so we can pursue justice for your dead wife and unborn child."

"We have enough evidence to fry you so admit you killed your pregnant wife and it'll go easier for you," she said.

"Vanessa was not carrying my child. I'm not...I wasn't the father of her baby."

"Oh, now we're getting somewhere," he said. "Did you kill your wife, Doctor, because she was having an affair with another man?"

"You killed her in a jealous rage," she hollered and smacked her hand against the table.

Great, now they had a motive. My lawyer advised me not to speak to the police but I spilled the story out of worry for Ronni and Traci. "My brother is a murderer. His wife and daughter may be in danger," I said again in a ragged voice.

“This identical twin brother you told us about?” Lead-Belly said and a bit of donut flew from his mouth.

Well they were a tidy twosome and very much in tune with each other. Frisco’s mouth was open and crumbs from his donut made a slam dunk between her lips, and she swallowed.

My voice grew more frustrated by the minute. “Brad blamed Ronni for ruining his life. He hates Ronni. The sick son of a bitch killed Vanessa.”

“You know, if there is a Brad and he is your brother, you just called your mother a bitch,” He said.

“You are not a nice man, you and this Brad,” Frisco said.

“He’s faking a split personality to plead insanity,” Lead-Belly added.

“Your DNA is all over the murder scene. I’ve never seen such a sloppy murder, almost like you were begging us to catch you.” She poked a finger on the table.

“I told you before that identical twins are the only beings on earth who share exact DNA. Brad and I was one person until the egg split apart into two duplicate people. Brad wanted to get caught because he framed me.”

“Now why would your identical twin brother, such a close tie as that, want to frame you for murder?” he asked.

“Revenge,” I answered.

“Revenge, huh?” Frisco looked at Lead-Belly.

“Brad believes I slept with his girlfriend.”

“Ronni?”

“No, Barbie.”

“Just how many women are involved here, Dr. Tremblay?” She narrowed her eyes at me, maybe thinking I was a serial killer.

Lead-Belly picked up the picture I earlier took from my wallet and threw the photo on the table between us. “You still claim this picture of the two of you was taken in Philadelphia?”

I nodded my head, yes.

“After your supposed, never-known-existed-long-lost-identical-twin brother and you met?” Frisco added.

I licked my lips. “You can’t tell us apart can you?”

“The only thing I see is an image of the *Rocky* statue stolen from the internet and then two photos of you superimposed with the statue to use as a twin alibi during planning of your wife’s murder. What kind of chumps do you think we are,” Frisco barked.

“He must have done the duplication trick with a computer,” Lead-Belly added.

“I just said that,” she said. “You made up this photo to blame your wife’s murder on your twin. It happens all the time.”

Smart ass. I had hoped the picture would explain everything and voila, instant twin brother, and they would at least check out my story.

“What we are looking at in this picture is premeditated murder,” he said.

“I already said that,” Frisco said with irritation.

“Look at the major difference. Brad is wearing a wedding ring,” I said, pointing to the photo.

“And where is your wedding ring, Dr. Tremblay?”

“Yeah,” Lead-Belly added, “didn’t you love your wife?”

I snapped my fingers. “My father knows about Brad.”

“Did your father ever meet your identical twin, the two of you standing side by side in the flesh?” Frisco asked.

“No.”

“We do cover all our bases and earlier checked with your father. He confirms you told him the same bullshit story you’re telling us,” she said.

“Bullshitting is usually inherited from the father right, Frisco?”

“That’s what the genetic books claim.”

“We did check with the adoption agency your parents adopted you from and guess what? The agency never heard of a twin brother,” he said.

“Maybe my brother was adopted from another agency.”

“Did you ask your brother?” she said.

“Yes, but he didn’t really know what agency his parents adopted him from.”

“Of course not,” she said in a motherly voice

“Course not!”

“So where does this Ronni O’Boyle, your uh brother’s wife live so we can confirm your story. Can she give you an alibi when your wife Vanessa was killed?” Lead-Belly asked.

I panicked at the mention of Ronni. “She doesn’t know about the switch.”

“Of course not,” Frisco said.

“Course not!”

“Ronni is in danger. Someone has to warn her about Brad!” I said.

“Even if this Ronni O’Boyle does exist, we can’t go running to America to tell her to watch out!” Frisco held her fingernails up as if she was saying, boo!

“We can’t just tell her that her husband is a murderer when we have no proof,” he added.

“When it’s you who killed Vanessa,” she said.

“Killed your wife and unborn child.”

“We know. We know.” Frisco held up her hands in mock horror. “You didn’t marry Vanessa.”

“Brad did,” they both sang out.

“Look, Dr. Tremblay, we’ll leave you on your own for a few minutes while you think up a better story to tell us,” he said.

“Like a confession,” she added.

The door slammed behind the detectives, and they left me alone with a stale donut and a coffee cup that read GUILTY on the side of the cup.

I stared into the cesspool depths of the coffee and daydreamed I was home.

The doorbell rings and I fling the door open.

She is here, at my house. Ronni has come to me. My weariness turns to adrenaline, just to be in her presence, to look at her sitting on my sofa in my den, a sight imagined a thousand times.

“Brad?” *Her face turns white.*

“I’m Jayden, Brad’s twin. You do believe me?” I grab from the table the photo of Brad and me and shove it at her face. “You can’t tell us apart can you?”

“It’s you,” she says with wonder and recognizes Jayden Tremblay, a physical carbon copy of her husband, the man who lived in her house, played pool with her, made love to her, slept with her, and sent her flowers.

She holds a hand to her head as though her skull pains her. “My God, I slept with my husband’s brother! You knew I was your brother’s wife yet pretended to be Brad!”

She cringes and sinks deeper into the sofa. “You’re no better than he is. You are Brad, all over again. Make the wife think she is crazy. Make me think my husband has a split personality. Make me believe that I am losing my mind. All along you were involved in Brad’s dirty little scheme. Did Brad intend to commit me to an insane asylum, changed his mind, and then murdered me instead? Why else would he keep a bloody knife?”

“Murdered you? Then you are a ghost! But you’re not transparent.”

“Well, I can see right through you. The mace,” she screams. “Where’s my purse?” Ronni fumbles around for her purse but the bag is not within reach.

I stand from the sofa, crushed by her relief that I no longer sit beside her.

“Brad never told me he had a twin brother. Why have they hidden you? Where did they hide you—the nut house where Brad should have been?”

“No, I’m in jail for killing my wife, I mean Brad’s wife.”

She cringes.

“I don’t mean you, Ronni!”

“You claim I am a ghost. Why? Did you murder me?”

“No, Brad did or he intends to kill you, Ronni.”

Reality crept into my nightmare. The interrogation room came into focus; typical two-way mirror the bozo cops thought was a secret with a metal table, and metal chair. If I stand up, the chair stays frozen to my butt and travels with me.

My stomach ached but not from the poisonous coffee.

I took a sip from my GUILTY cup and made a mental note: *Do not tell the detectives about sleeping with your sister-in-law else, they will think you even more perverted.*

Chapter 59

BRAD

I must resemble a statue, staring at my hands with morbid fascination—*these bloody hands* though the phrase is just a metaphor.

To get away with murder, is a rush, and I join the secret ranks of those who have committed the perfect crime. Her husband killed her. Jayden murdered Vanessa. He will rot in prison or receive capital punishment because Vanessa was pregnant. There is no sympathy for a man who kills his wife *and* unborn child.

My brother hated me for getting his wife pregnant, so there was even more of an incentive to kill Vanessa and get her out of the way of both of us. Jayden did not want a wife, much less to be saddled with a child joining him to Vanessa's hip. Even after divorce, a kid throws the parents together for birthdays, graduations, weddings, blah, blah, blah, all that joint family junk of a modern family, a mix of mongrels.

There goes my head pounding again! I swear the baby screamed each time I plunged the knife into Vanessa.

Shut up! Shut up!

My thigh hurts like the devil bit me, Vanessa and her pointy teeth. She was stronger than she looked and wore a pair of spiky shoes with metal heels that could slice right through a man's leg. *Bitch!* She ruined my perfect murder by leaving an ugly purple bruise on my leg with a gash right through the middle of the bruise.

The aftermath feels as if we both killed her, drawing me closer to my brother as I filmed her dying. The memory now brings tears to my eyes, to have another meaningful experience with my identical twin, the sharing of murder. How deep can brotherly love go? The sharing of wives. The sharing of murder. I commit the kill; Jayden pays for the crime.

I have not lost my sense of humor and am laughing so hard my thigh aches. The vice of murder was not charged to my brother's credit card so

really, “just shut the fuck up, Jayden, and quit complaining! I know what a whiny baby you are little brother.”

And I wink, wink at the mirror.

Chapter 60

JAYDEN

I paced the jail cell waiting for the detectives.

At last, there were footsteps in the hallway.

Lead-Belly munched on a bologna sandwich, and Frisco rocked on her feet. “So what’s this about?”

“Why did you ask to see us?” His fat face told me this had better be good or else.

I shook the cell bars, my fingers turning white. “Check the fingerprints on the marriage certificate! I never touched the marriage certificate. Brad’s prints should be on the marriage certificate, not mine. Same thing goes for the DVD.” At least I hoped Brad’s prints were on the marriage certificate and DVD, unless Brad planned to murder Vanessa from the very beginning and frame me for the murder and so always wore gloves.

Lead-Belly rolled his eyes at Frisco.

“You claim you and Brad are identical twins with identical DNA. Same prints, right?” Frisco said.

“I forgot that fingerprints of identical twins are differentiable. Fingerprints are the interaction of an individual’s genes *and* the developmental environment of the fetus in the mother’s uterus. This microenvironment of the fetus actually determines the fine detail of the fingerprint structure of all humans. While genes do determine general characteristics of fingerprint patterns, the surface tissue of the fingers of the fetus are in contact with amniotic fluid in the womb. Fingertips are also in contact with other parts of the fetus and the uterus, as the fetus moves on its own in the womb and in response to positional changes of the mother. Because of this movement of the fetus, the microenvironment of the growing cells on each fingertip is in constant flux. Therefore, fingerprints of identical twins are not exactly the same because each twin moves independently in the womb and touches things at contrasting times, using different pressures while the prints are formed.”

Whew, what a mouthful, that was a lot of information for these two numbskulls to digest. Frisco and Lead-Belly were impressed enough to at least promise to dust the marriage certificate and the wedding video for prints other than mine and Vanessa's prints.

Bet we find Tremblay's prints on that marriage certificate, Lead-Belly seemed to be saying to Frisco when he looked at her.

What a nut case, Frisco seemed to answer back. *Still thinks he is two different men, bipolar or something.*

"Maybe we should have you talk to the psychologist," he offered.

"Suppose you're hearing voices and the twins live only in your head," she added.

They led me to the criminal psychologist for an evaluation. It was not in my best interest to object.

The psychologist gave me the obvious examination. He asked if I hated my birth mother for giving me up for adoption. Did I get along with my adoption mother or did I hate her, too?

"I don't hate anybody," I mumbled, *except for my brother.*

Did any female teachers sexually molest me? And so on.

An officer led me back to my cell.

I lay on the cot with an arm thrown over my face. I had seen too many movies and my previous daydream had a sequel.

Once again, Ronni is at my house sitting on the sofa.

"I'm not being a polite host," I say.

"I'm not your guest!"

"Can I, uh, get you something? A soft drink? Glass of wine? Supper? Anything to make you more comfortable," I insist.

"You've done enough!" she snaps.

Her dress rides up on her thigh and I ogle her bare skin.

She slaps her skirt over her leg and hisses at me.

I walk even further away from her, plop down on a chair, and clench my hands together.

“You took advantage of me, Jayden. It was bad enough you had sex with me under false pretenses but the real tragedy is that you made me care about you.”

“You care for me?” I sound like one of Pussy’s squeaky toys.

“You romanced me with flowers and lies just to get me in the sack. Then you made me cry when you switched back with Brad and he went running back to Barbie. You broke my heart, Jayden.”

“Ronni I...”

“Brad found another way to hurt me through you. Damn you for being just like your brother. No! You are worse than Brad, because you pretended to care about me. Oh, your little act was really good!”

“But I’m not anything like Brad. I am the man who loves you, Ronni!”

She cuffs her ears with her hands and screams, “Lies! The two of you must have had a good laugh at my expense!”

I jumped off the cot at the sound of two pairs of heavy shoes.

“You look as if you’ve seen a ghost, doctor,” Frisco said.

“Talk about ghosts,” Lead-Belly added, “the flight attendant you claimed could verify seeing you and your so-called twin brother on the flight to New York met with an accident. Good thing you are locked up, else we would suspect you of foul play.”

“Suspecting me wouldn’t make sense. The woman is my witness. Why would I harm her?”

“Because you’re a woman hater?”

“In any case,” he added, “the woman is in a coma in a Philadelphia hospital.”

Chapter 61

BRAD

My eyes are glazed from drugs and bloodshot from booze, making it hard to focus on the television screen and watch my favorite teams, Rangers versus the Astros. With shaky fingers, I reach into the popcorn bag and open my eighth beer of the afternoon.

“Shit!” Beer foams down the beer can and onto my pants.

I have always been a neat freak but now simply brush the beer onto the floor. Mustard from a bologna sandwich stains my crumpled shirt and you know what? I do not give a crap!

“Uh, Brad, can I talk to you in the dining room?” Ronni wrinkles her nose at my alluring scent from not having had a shower all weekend.

“Not now, I’m busy,” and I will not smell any better in the dining room. Really? You want me sitting at the table where food is served. My stench is why I eat TV dinners. I can smell Vanessa’s perfume on me and showering does not remove the stink of a rotting corpse.

Ronni sits on the edge of a chair, hugging her knees. “Fine, we’ll talk in here then. When I told you I wanted a divorce, I was serious.”

I throw popcorn at her. “You never told me you wanted to divorce me.”

“Yes, I did, remember?”

Ah, Jayden strikes again. He never mentioned a divorce conversation with my wife while impersonating me! “And did I agree to this divorce?” I ask in a sullen voice. Damn Jayden probably agreed to give Ronni everything I own to get back at me for killing Vanessa. Damn I am mixed up again. Jayden did not find out about the murder until her body tripped him up all the way to jail. Ha!

“I’ve made an appointment with a lawyer. I think it’s time we end this travesty of a marriage that’s not doing either of us any good.”

I throw the entire frickin' bag of popcorn at her and smack her with kernels, leaving her nostrils shiny with butter. "You naively think you can divorce me that easily!"

She thrusts her jaw out. "We live separate lives anyway. We may as well make it legal."

I stand to my imposing height and jab a finger at her. "No way am I ever letting you divorce me, Ronni. I am not going to let you have this house or half of what is mine just because Texas is a community property state!"

"Look, Brad," and she holds out her palms to me. "My hands are empty and will remain empty. I do not want anything from you. Just let me have Traci. You can keep everything else, the house, cars, in fact the whole caboodle. Just let me have my freedom, peacefully. I don't want to fight."

"I suppose you'll sue for half my income for child support?"

"No, I don't even want that. No child support. Promise."

Ronni is willing to walk away with what she brought to our marriage, namely Traci and the clothes on her back. First Barbie wants to screw my brother because she thinks he is a sensitive man. Now, my wife wants to leave me after living with Jayden. She cannot live with me any more after living with my kinder, gentler brother.

How could I have been so stupid! Of course! She knows about the bloody knife. A wife cannot testify against her husband but Ronni will after she divorces me.

"I'll see you dead before giving you a divorce," I snarl.

Ronni hugs her upper arms, shivering. Good. She appears scared. *Run for your life, whore! Brad is coming!*

"You ruined the game I was watching." I snap off the television and limp up the stairs to my bedroom.

I lock the bathroom door, sit on the toilet, and inhale some powdery cocaine. Normally coke makes me really feel like *Superman* but since Vanessa, nothing helps my pounding head, aching stomach, and nerves that

are about to jump out of skin. Instead, melancholy engulfs me, as if mourning my brother, yet I will not feel safe until Canada executes Jayden.

I massage the bridge of my nose that seems to be collapsing. My nose is bleeding again and there I go crying like a baby. *I am the rotting corpse! The police are coming after me. Boo-hoo-hoo!* Even my own mother thinks I am guilty and will not return my phone calls. Of course, I never said a thing to the old lady.

Jayden must have told Mother. Why else won't she speak to me? Poor motherless Brad.

Unfortunately, the effects of snorting cocaine last about 30 minutes. The anxiety in my chest worsens and I can hardly breathe. *I am dying, decomposing from the inside out!*

I grab the bottle of prescription pills I wrote for panic attacks and the bottle flips in the air, scattering pills all over the bathroom.

Where is the bottle of tranquilizers? Come to Papa, little pills, calm my nerves!

Oh crap! It takes 30 minutes for the tranquilizers to relax my nerves while waiting for the panic-attack pills to work. With the trace of cocaine still in my system, the tranquilizer works faster, making me finally feel as if I am floating.

I stagger from the bathroom in my undershorts. *Oh, damn I wet my pants!*

I walk naked to the bed that fades in and out. I am mostly out of it but still conscious enough to flick on the television to an international station for any news of Canadian murders.

It is freezing in here, and I wrap myself with the bedspread like a cocoon. "Traci, turn on the heat for your father," I mumble. "Where are you, frickin' kid when I need you?"

I begin to drift off to a groggy sleep, soothed by the voice of a Canadian newscaster. The room is warming up. I need to rest. If only I could get some shuteye. I have not slept since...

Suddenly, a frigid hand strokes my cheek.

I sit up gasping for air.

The room is ice cold as if a ghost just left.

The bedspread is like a snake squeezing the life from me, and I roll around the bed kicking at the covers.

Someone is singing in a high woman's voice.

I jump from the mattress and dive beneath the bed.

I lay there shivering, yet comforted by the dark confined space.

When I was a child, I would complain at night, "Mother, Mother, there are monsters hiding beneath my bed! Please help me!"

Now, hiding under my bed, for the first time in two days, I fall into a light sleep, one of those half-awake, half-asleep experiences where you can hear yourself snore.

My loud snoring noises sound like growls. But...I have never snored in my life.

Really, I have turned into the monster hiding under my bed.

Chapter 62

JAYDEN

“They’re not your prints,” Frisco said.

“Why aren’t your prints on your marriage certificate?” Lead-Belly asked.

“Because it was not me who married Vanessa.”

“Maybe you wore gloves when you signed the marriage certificate,” she said in a hopeful voice.

“Whose prints are on the marriage certificate then?” he asked.

“The fingerprints belong to my brother.”

“There are three other sets of prints,” she said.

“Probably Brad’s, the minister who married them and Vanessa’s prints are on the certificate.”

Frisco and Lead-Belly looked at each other as if to say, *maybe the doctor has a point.*

“Just because you didn’t marry Vanessa, doesn’t mean you didn’t kill her,” she said.

“Your DNA is still all over the murder scene.”

“I told you before that Brad and I have the same DNA. Brad’s DNA is all over the murder scene. Did you check the wedding video?”

“Your prints aren’t on the DVD either,” Frisco admitted. “The marriage certificate prints match the DVD, including the case, and there are another set of prints.”

“They’re Brad’s prints, and the other set must be the guy who shot the marriage video in Vegas.”

“That still doesn’t prove that you didn’t kill her,” he insisted.

“I was out of the country when she was murdered.”

“So you say,” Frisco scoffed.

“You have no proof,” Lead-Belly said.

“There is proof that I should have thought of before! Check with the airlines and get hold of the boarding passes for the destinations and dates I write down for you. The fingerprints on the tickets of Brad O’Boyle and Jayden Tremblay will show I was not in Victoria when Vanessa was murdered. The man whose prints are on the marriage certificate and the DVD, and the airline tickets to Las Vegas was. His fingerprints will be on the boarding passes and prove he was in Canada when Vanessa was murdered. That man is my twin, Brad O’Boyle, who was pretending to be me. Check my laptop for email back and forth between Brad and me regarding travel. Here is the username and password.”

Frisco and Lead-Belly looked at each other like, *okay, might take some time.*

They got up from their chairs to leave.

“Wait,” I said.

“Your face is pale, doctor. Looks like you’re not doing too good in jail but then most men of your class never do,” he said.

“Ronni O’Boyle.” I dragged the name from the depths of my soul. “You’ve got to warn her.”

“If your story checks out, then we’ll see about getting in touch with Mrs. O’Boyle. No use scaring her for nothing,” she said. “We can’t go telling a woman her husband is a murderer unless we have proof.”

“If what you claim is true and there are reasonable grounds to suspect this Brad O’Boyle, then we’ll contact the American authorities to handle things at their end and see if they’ll cooperate in extraditing him. To tell the truth, we can’t go sticking our noses outside of Victoria without going through the proper channels,” Lead-Belly said sheepishly.

They led me back to my jail cell.

I sat on my lumpy mattress, holding my head in my hands and never feeling so helpless in my life.

My father could sneak me a gun. Ouch! My father would be an accessory in a jail escape. Alternatively, my lawyer could...nah forget about it. My attorney was angry with me for cooperating with the authorities when he was not around, but I had to talk in order to help Ronni.

Besides, the detectives would not let me speak to my father so I could ask him to call Ronni and warn her. My lawyer refused to call her, claiming he could not interfere in a police case and smear Brad O'Boyle's reputation. Brad could sue him. "Be patient," my attorney had said. "We'll get you out of here. You've bought the best legal defense money can buy."

I clung to the jail bars, imagining standing behind Ronni, breathing into her hair. She was tingly from my hot breath pushing against her scalp.

My daydream transported me back to my house for the second sequel.

The palms of her hands lay flat against the door, her head sandwiched between my hot forearms warming her cheeks. My muscles pulse against the sides of her face.

"I'm not going to let you walk out on me that easily, Ronni."

I rub my face against her hair, sliding my hands down her arms and to her hips, holding her tightly against me. "I can't stand the thought of being without you. My life is an empty shell when you are not in my world. I am only complete when I am with you. These past weeks without you have been like a knife in my back."

I spin her around, placing my hands flat against the door and trapping her. "I need you, Ronni. I desire you. I want to make you happy, both you and Traci. Your happiness is all I have cared about since meeting you. I long to be with you, to make love to you, and be loved by you."

I bring my lips down to her mouth and kiss her as light as a feather.

"You're so gentle," she moans.

I unzip her dress and shaking with desire, offer her my hand. "Come to my bed."

She flings her face back from me and slams her skull against the back of the door.

There is a loud crack and Ronni slumps to the floor.

I stare down at her lifeless eyes.

Oh, no! No!

Her head is cracked in two!

I shook my head and my jail cell came into view.

I staggered to the jail bed and wept.

Chapter 63

BRAD

I sleep a couple of hours under my bed and then stew the rest of the night thinking about Jayden and Vanessa. Jayden and Barbie. Jayden and Ronni. I wish with all my heart that I never met my twin brother. If Canada has the death penalty, I am wearing a mask to attend his execution. I am, after all, a master of disguises.

I plan to carry the bag with the murder weapon between home and office once I go back to work. A killer should destroy evidence, but the knife is a souvenir.

Lack of sleep always puts me in a foul mood. I rifle through my clothes for a shirt to wear to work. *I should just call in sick to my stomach.*

What the fu...? Where did this shirt come from? I whistle through my teeth as my heart skips a beat. Even after imagining watching Jayden hang, I can still get sentimental over my brother.

The initials JT stitched on his white shirt are soft, delicate, and silky against my cheek.

Your brother carelessly left another shirt behind where the housekeeper or Ronni could find it.

Ronni is like a nosy detective. Ronni found the travel bag. Ronni found the murder weapon.

Your wife knows something, which is why she wants a divorce.

Nah! The idea is preposterous and I yell at my inner voice to “Shut up!”

Sniff the shirt to see if your wife was all over your brother!

What the...Ronni’s perfume!

I ball the shirt up, balling and balling and kicking the shirt. I then toss Jayden’s threads into the trashcan, making a perfect basket.

Okay, calm down. Dumb Ronni probably never noticed the initials on the shirt.

She would have said something, surely. Look how she believed my excuse about the bloody kitchen knife in the travel bag. I roll around the carpet, laughing. *I cut up some meat for supper, Ronni.* A cow named Vanessa. Moo!

Another panic attack is coming on and I am practically kissing my knees because the ache in my stomach is excruciating. Where is the travel bag? The bag was here a few minutes ago. Earlier, I threw the bag in the closet and then went downstairs to get the newspaper.

Ronni must have crept up here for the bag. She knows about the knife. She saw the blood. She plans to go to the police, which is why she so smugly asks for a divorce. She is not giving up anything to be free of me. She is putting me away for life or pulling a switch on the electric chair. She will be a rich widow.

Ah, there is the travel bag in the corner sort of hiding.

Zip!

Good. The knife is still there. Good.

I zip the bag up. I had not noticed before...why didn't I...how could I be so frickin' stupid! Jayden's nametag and address are under a plastic holder on the side of the bag!

Ronni saw his name on the bag, which is why she wants a divorce. She read in the Victoria newspaper that Jayden Tremblay was arrested for stabbing his wife to death. Maybe she even saw the news on Canadian television on cable. She saw his picture and thinks I killed Jayden's wife. She believes I am Jayden and have been living a double life.

Well, a dead wife cannot divorce her husband and then testify against him.

I stuff the travel bag into the closet and pile even more stuff around it.

I sit in the dark closet, banging my head against the wall and humming, *how to get rid of Ronni, how to get rid of Ronni, how to...*

She will not be easy to kill like Vanessa. Ronni is legally Brad O'Boyle's wife. True, she has no family who will miss her, but that nosy friend Riley hates my guts. She would come sniffing around if Ronni disappeared.

Ah-ha! The waste container has the shirt with Jayden's initials. Let Jayden kill Ronni just as Jayden murdered Vanessa.

I try on the white shirt with the JT initials stitched across the pocket and the shirt still fits my perfect body. Jayden's shirt is not garbage after all.

I shake out anxiety pills from the bottle, toss back my head, and swallow a couple.

Killing Ronni is Jayden's fault for being such an idiot as to leave his shirt behind where Ronni can find it.

Jayden stares back at me from the full-length mirror. All it takes to become Jayden again is to wear my brother's shirt. I even smile like my brother with kind eyes from a sensitive face. All the women love Jayden. Vanessa. Ronni. Barbie. *My* women love Jayden more than they love me.

"Jayden," I snarl and bring the knife down, repeatedly stabbing the mirror. Click. Click. Click. Tiny mirror shards accumulate in the sink until I finish killing my imaginary brother.

It is now I looking back from the mirror, no longer kind, sensitive, or beloved, no longer loving, but alone. They are all gone, my wives. Vanessa, my second wife is dead, her throat sliced by Jayden, a fitting end for a number two.

And Ronni will soon be dead.

I stroke the initials JT on my brother's shirt and smile at Ronni's bloodstains. Vanessa needs company. Once Ronni is dead, the icy hand will quit stroking me. Vanessa will quit singing to me. I can sleep on my bed again instead of under the bed. I will not jump every time a phone rings nor duck my head when a police car pulls up beside me in traffic.

A perfect murder is all in the planning. In Canada, I met a man at a bar who knows some people, who knows some people who can forge some

documents. I have his card and he will create Jayden Tremblay's passport with my picture. I will fly to Victoria as myself and then fly back to Austin as Jayden to commit another perfect crime. I already have a history of flying to Canada on business. Or was it Jayden who always flew to Canada while I flew to Austin? The logistics matter not. We are the same, with identical DNA.

I dress for work and then stroll down the stairs, whistling.

A man with a plan does not have panic attacks or need anxiety medicine.

Chapter 64

JAYDEN

“Well,” Frisco said as if surprised, “your story seems to check out, Dr. Tremblay.”

“You and this Brad O’Boyle left a travel paper trail behind you,” Lead-Belly added.

“It seems you were in Austin when your wife was killed.”

“Brad’s wife,” I repeated like a scratchy record.

“We dusted your house for another suspect’s prints and it seems that’s where the suspect stayed while in Victoria.” He shrugged his shoulders. “You say your house guest, the suspect, is this O’Boyle guy.”

“You’re free to go, Dr. Tremblay, for now.”

I’ve got to get to Ronni and Traci!

“Not so fast.” Lead-Belly pushed me back in the chair.

“You’ll be released as soon as we get the paper work to the judge,” she said.

“The courthouse closed about six minutes ago so I’m afraid you’ll have to spend one more night in jail.”

“You’ll be free in the morning, Dr. Tremblay, after the judge signs the papers.”

“I need to make a phone call. It’s urgent!”

“Until the judge has signed the papers, you’ve got to abide by the same rules as before,” he said.

“But...”

“No buts,” Frisco said.

“Don’t worry about your sister-in-law. We plan to work with the Austin police to investigate Dr. O’Boyle. The police need to fingerprint him to verify he is the same Brad O’Boyle who was posing as you in your home. If he is a suspect, then we can talk extradition as soon as red tape is cleared both here and in America.”

“It sounds like the process may take awhile,” I muttered.

“Just don’t leave the country, Doctor. You’re not home free yet,” she said. “We first have to check out this Brad O’Boyle to confirm his DNA is a match.”

“And just because O’Boyle was in Canada doesn’t mean he killed Vanessa,” Lead-Belly added.

“You know, Dr. Tremblay, it’s against the law to fly under someone else’s name and identity.”

“The airlines might want to press criminal charges.”

“And you’re both doctors. Isn’t there some crime about that?”

“Could be.” Frisco shrugged her shoulders.

As if I gave a crap. I was more worried about Ronni.

The detectives escorted me back to my cell and walked away.

Frisco spun and marched back to the cell. “What’s odd is that Air Canada has four reservations for next week. Two reservations are in your name and the other two are in O’Boyle’s name. O’Boyle is to fly from Austin to Victoria, and then you are to fly on a round trip to Austin afterwards. There is an additional ticket for O’Boyle to fly back from Canada. They’re not coordinated trips like before where you met up.”

“But I didn’t make a reservation. I got back my passport from Brad the last time I saw him. Why would Brad still be impersonating me?”

“Why indeed?”

“Hey, Frisco, I’m starving. Let’s get lunch,” Lead-Belly hollered.

“Coming, Lead-Belly.”

The detectives walked towards the exit.

My mind churned away. The time lapse in the travel itinerary would allow Brad to fly to Canada as himself, and then hop on a plane and fly back to Austin as me.

He must know that the police are going to free me.

I pounded on the bars of my cell and yelled at the top of my lungs. “He’s going to kill Ronni. He’s going to kill her!”

The main door slammed behind the detectives.

I crumpled to the floor, sobbing, “He’s going to kill her.”

September 5, 2015

BY MY CALMNESS, YOU WOULD THINK I HAVE FRAMED SOMEONE FOR MURDER BEFORE when I myself am the killer. The secret to my serenity is in the zygote, a shared experience with my identical twin. I can feel his presence in the plane as if my brother is sitting beside me. He is my navigator as I fly into the abyss. I see his face in the mist and hear his voice. *Why didn't you love me? Why, brother?*

* * *

Part 8: A Funeral in Austin

Chapter 65

JAYDEN

They released me from jail and my lawyer read me the riot act about how I should not leave the country. Naturally, I caught a taxi and told the driver, “Ignore my lawyer. Try not to run over his toes.”

“But he said that’s his cell phone you’ve got there, buddy, and to give it back.” He looked at me with suspicion having just picked me up from jail where I had stood waiting at the curb beside my lawyer and holding a small suitcase.

“Just drive,” I barked. “Get me to the airport as fast as you can.”

I dialed my lawyer’s cell phone.

The answering machine picked up at Brad’s office and recited a message about the office being closed for a funeral. My first thought was that Brad murdered Ronni and got away with it.

His cell phone went straight to voice mail.

There was no answer at his house.

I took a deep breath and dialed Ronni’s cell phone.

Come on. Come on. Pick up. Somebody pick up the damn phone.

But nothing.

I blinked back my tears, trying to calm down.

Later, it felt strange flying into Austin as me, departing the plane, claiming *my* luggage.

I kept trying and trying to reach Ronni by phone as I wheeled my suitcase.

I turned a corner at the airport and ran smack dab into this morning’s news. I would never have even noticed the *Austin American Statesman* had the picture of Brad on the front page not been so large.

The headline screamed bloody murder, or was it an accident as the killer claimed?

"I'm too late," I mumbled and dropped my lawyer's cell phone. The battery had run down. The cell phone was dead.

Dead.

Dead.

With a hand that had to try three times before I could sink a quarter into the slot of the machine, I finally opened the little door and grabbed a copy of the *Austin American Statesman*.

Everything turned black and I almost did not make it to a chair.

I sat down so hard on my butt I might have chipped my tailbone. The only pain I felt was in my heart.

It felt incredibly eerie to see my face staring out from the front page stating that the man who looked exactly like me was dead.

A picture of the murder suspect was on page two, Barbie Simpson. She was barely recognizable because the photo was of an ugly woman with a crooked nose and uneven jaw. One eye was half-closed.

Millionaire's Wife Kills Lover in Revenge Murder, the article was entitled. Next to Barbie's picture was a photo of Bubba Simpson, a 70 year-old man with beady eyes who ate too much rich Texas barbeque and resembled a balding, red-headed hog with streaks of grey in his hair that he combed from one side of his head to the other. From the way he dressed, the man had the class of trailer-trash and the look of a used car salesman, which he was though he now owned a chain of them.

The article stated that early in the morning two days ago someone shot Dr. Brad O'Boyle at Barton Springs Pool. The gun had her prints on it but Barbie claimed she was innocent.

It was surprising her husband was not a suspect since he had threatened to kill Brad.

Bubba Simpson had lots of money to pay for the best lawyer for his wife but he refused to pay a plastic surgeon to fix her ruined face. Considering how rich and powerful he was, more than likely Barbie would get away with murder.

There was a news report on the television screen at the airport. Barbie stood on the stairs of the courthouse, straightened her peroxide blonde hair, and winked at the press with her good eye. "I'm a former Texas beauty queen," she purred, though she was a bit hard to understand because of her wired jaw. "I barely knew the doctor, what's his name, Bad O'Boyle." Barbie deliberately mispronounced Brad's name. Already, she was painting him as a bad man. "He did this to me." She pointed to her face and then tried to blow kisses at the press but her mouth was puffed up with lip fillers.

There was much speculation in the press as to why Barbie would kill Brad O'Boyle. Was the murder the result of a jealous spat or her man done her wrong? *City Confidential* already swooped down on Austin, Texas preparing to film a documentary of the sordid mess. The fact that the scandal involved a love triangle with a former Texas beauty queen, a bigamist doctor, and her millionaire husband ensured a movie of the week—*Sex, Texas and Death*. In addition, there was the added bonus that Dr. O'Boyle had been living a double life in Canada and murdered his second wife. The dead wife in Canada had been pregnant with his baby.

I sighed with relief that the paper mentioned Brad's wife and daughter survived him in Austin. The paper did not mention that Brad had a long lost identical twin brother. The police in Canada were keeping quiet since Brad posing as me was part of their murder investigation, and they did not want any leak to the press.

No wonder Ronni was not answering her phone. The article mentioned her as part of a love quadrangle.

I darted into a gift shop and purchased a Texas Longhorns baseball cap, which I yanked over my forehead. I placed some sunglasses over my eyes and walked with my head down.

I darted into the airport bathroom and splashed water on my face, barely recognizing the man staring back at me from the mirror. My face was pale from time spent in jail and worry about Ronni.

I threw a balled up paper towel at the mirror. *So now what do you intend to do, fool?*

Here I was in Austin all ready to play the hero with Ronni but she was no longer in any danger from Brad.

So now what?

Obviously, my sister-in-law's bed with me posing as her husband was out of the question since Brad was now dead. I intended to do the honorable thing. I would hole up...hide out in a hotel until my brother's funeral, which I had every intention of attending.

Honor they brother. Honor they brother.

I called my housekeeper and asked her to send a black suit to Austin, Texas along with some additional clothing.

Chapter 66

JAYDEN

The funeral home was a brown, one-story brick building on First Street, west of Congress Avenue. How a devil like Brad O'Boyle ended up at a mortuary named *Angel Funeral Home* was beyond my comprehension. The funeral home blasted organ music from a speaker mounted on a painting of heaven's pearly gates and I imagined Brad with a shovel, wearing a *Canucks* baseball hat, digging a hole under the fence so he could sneak into heaven.

The white French paneling and living room decor was supposed to make a mourner feel at home while inhaling the smell of death—formaldehyde mixed with orange furniture oil, and antiseptic.

I signed the guest book of Brad's viewing and took a seat at the back in the shadows. No one paid any attention to me, even the news media. I was a stranger with a fedora hat tilted low on my forehead and wearing black shades. My invisibility was comforting while at the same time uncomfortable, as if I did not belong here.

I had as much right as anyone to be at Brad's viewing, more than most!

Ronni sat with the woman who hung out with her that night at Lovejoys when we played pool.

Across the aisle from Ronni sat Brad's mother crying on her husband's shoulder. There were others seated behind Viola and Ethan who may have been members of Brad's adoptive family, aunts, uncles, second cousins, etc.

Ronni turned her head slightly and I pushed my hat lower on my forehead, sliding my rear down the seat.

Ronni seemed transfixed by the black coffin.

What must she be feeling about Barbie murdering Brad? She must know about her husband marrying another woman, a wife he killed in

Canada. The morning news revealed that Frisco and Lead-Belly found the murder weapon and closed the case, excluding any mention of me. Frisco had told me they already did enough to tarnish my reputation.

Even so, my own trial was just beginning. It felt as if a noose was tightening around my neck every time I glanced at Ronni.

When the women from Brad's office stood up to leave, I placed my face in my hands pretending to cry.

Do not look at them. Be invisible. They are grieving. Fade into the pew.

It was harder to avoid Ronni. I rolled my eyes to the right when she walked by with her friend. Luckily, she was distraught and did not look my way. Her friend supported her arm. Ronni sniffled and I fought the urge to go to her.

And do exactly what? I thought. She would think Brad's corpse climbed from his coffin.

Traci was not at the funeral.

Everyone trickled out and the room emptied.

I walked with slow deliberate steps towards the coffin decorated with gold-colored trim. White lilies draped the lower half.

A white satin pillow supported Brad's head. The mortician had closed his eyes, of course, and made up his cheeks and lips with pinkish makeup. Powder lightly dusted his face. His hair was combed perfectly and appeared plastic. His hands were stiff, the skin stretched, and folded serenely on his chest. A small Bible rested between his hands.

Same old Brad, even in death his smile was mischievous as if he was playing a joke and would rise any moment from his coffin.

It was morbid to see what my own corpse would look like. I cursed myself for coming to the funeral home but had to see for myself that Brad was dead. I cringed and poked his ribs just to make sure he would not chuckle in his devilish, charming way.

Unexpectedly, I broke down and wept at the coffin of my twin. We had once been one a fertilized egg in our mother's womb, and then split in half. A part of me had always been missing and then I found Brad and was whole for a few months, sort of. Brad was mentally ill. Given the same circumstances and raised in the same environment, it could have been me in the coffin instead of my brother. Every man had a propensity for evil because along with the good, evil was in our nature. Humans were a mix of opposites. I both loved Brad and hated him at the same time.

"He's my brother," Brad had bragged to the flight attendants on the planes from Philly, as if we were the best of friends, as if we had been raised together as brothers.

Oh, God, I did not want to remember the good times with his corpse in his coffin, making me feel vulnerable and guilty.

My chest tightened as if rubber bands dug into my ribs and I could not breathe. It was ironic, given the circumstances, that I felt closer to Brad in death than I did in life. It was as if the coffin was our mother's womb and I lay beside Brad's corpse, hugging my brother.

"Twins have this unexplainable bond," Brad once said. "It's telepathic, as if our minds and hearts are joined since our minds and hearts are duplicates. Think of it, brother. You and I were one zygote, the same, you and me, me and you, even in death."

Brad was sucking me into the coffin. *Join me, Jayden. We can spend eternity together.*

I took a step back, spun on my heel, and ran.

I could have sworn Brad was nipping at my heels and I crashed out the back door of the funeral home.

I leaned against the building with my eyes closed, breathing heavily. Oh, God, oh, God! I had to confess to someone!

Shall I tell you how I killed Brad O'Boyle, my nemesis, my archenemy, my beloved twin brother, my other half?

Yeah, I framed Barbie Simpson for Brad's murder. After all, I am like my brother, my identical twin.

Chapter 67

JAYDEN

Once upon a time, I saved the life of the sister of a man who had the skills to make me a fake passport. The forger only needed a small photo and a few hours. He, also, gave me a disposable credit card with the same fake name as my phony American passport. He, also, printed me a pilot's license under the assumed name.

I once gave a man a steep discount on his wife's medical bills. This man operated a ferry between Victoria and Seattle. He took me across the water to Seattle alone, late at night when the other ferries were not running.

Whereas Brad played golf, I flew as a sport and rented a plane at Paine Field Airport under my fraudulent passport name. Just like my passport photo, I wore a blonde wig and glasses. I paid cash giving the bogus credit card number as a deposit for any overcharge.

I flew into Lakeway Airpark located in Lakeway, Texas near Lake Travis. The airport was so small that picnic tables were located outside. There was only one runway.

When I returned to Canada after stashing Barbie's gun in a storage facility, everything blew up, what with Brad really being married to Vanessa and us having to switch again, and then Brad returned to Canada and killed her.

Yeah, it was extreme stupidity to trust Brad again, but he was my identical twin so I never in a million years thought he would murder anyone, since I would not kill another human being for any reason, well, except for my brother.

The police then arrested me so I never got the chance to mail Barbie the key to the storage unit and inform her that she left her gun at Brad's office.

It now took me about 40 minutes to drive up 71 to Austin-Bergstrom International Airport to retrieve Barbie's gun at the nearby storage facility. I

wiped any previous prints off the storage unit and wore surgical gloves so as not to leave any new fingerprints on anything.

I then drove 14 miles back on 71 to Mopac, exiting to Barton Springs Pool at Zilker Park.

The Indians once considered Barton Springs sacred and used the water for purification. Trees surrounded the pool, and the park was deserted in the wee morning hours.

I dialed a number on my cell phone. "Hello, bro, it's me," I said in a neutral voice.

Brad, of course, would refuse to meet me since he framed me for Vanessa's murder. He would figure I was out for blood, but Brad had an Achilles' heel.

"I'm here in Austin because Barbie can't get enough of me. Yeah, I did have your soul mate, bro, ten different ways. In fact, I'm waiting for her here at Barton Springs Pool." I hung up the phone and Brad screaming at me.

We had a connection that only identical twins have. He was hotheaded while I usually remained cool, but I could feel my head exploding because Brad was in a temper.

It took him about 20 minutes to drive to Zilker Park.

His tires screeched and the car door slammed.

He limped down a long set of steps leading down to the pool. "Where is she?" he screeched. "I'm going to kill the two of you!"

There was a lamp pole close by so I hid the gun behind my back.

He came closer, his face enraged and his fists out.

I swung the gun around and for a flicker of a moment he appeared scared.

I fired, emptying the gun.

Brad jerked with each bullet that hit him and I felt his pain and his shock.

I stood over my dying brother.

Brad rasped out the last words he would ever say to me: “I am your other half. *You* are my soul mate. How could you let a woman come between us?”

“I’m sorry, Brad, but I just couldn’t let you murder your wife. Ronni is *my* soul mate and Barbie is simply collateral damage.”

“Like Vanessa,” he mewled, blood bubbling from his lips.

I aimed the gun at his forehead and fired the last bullet.

I dropped Barbie’s gun, which still had her fingerprints all over the metal.

I ran towards the rental car, drove the 30 minutes to Lakeway Airpark, and flew back to Seattle.

I waited a day and then drove to Oregon where I called the Austin police and tipped them off about Brad beating up Barbie Simpson and her husband threatening to kill him. “Just thought you’d like to know that both Simpsons, husband and wife, had a motive for wanting to kill Dr. O’Boyle.”

By the calmness of my voice, you would think I have framed someone for murder before when I myself am the killer. The secret to my serenity is in the zygote, a shared experience with my identical twin. I once believed Brad to be much different from me due to the environments we were raised in. It turned out everything about spooky similarities between identical twins not raised together was true. Brad and I both became murderers and both framed other people, but it takes more than shared genes to make a brother, more than the tie in a mother’s womb, an egg split apart like an atom creating a nuclear explosion of shattered lives.

Mine was a righteous kill.

Chapter 68

RONNI

I recognize everyone at Brad's funeral except for a man dressed in a trench coat holding a large black umbrella above his head. He wears a black fedora hat shading his face and sunglasses even though it is a dreary, rainy day at Oakwood Cemetery. The man stands at the back by himself and seems to be trying his best to blend in with the fringes of the crowd. The man watches me, giving me a creepy feeling, but then many of the mourners are staring so I am trying to seem like a grieving widow.

There is a canopy reserved for family, and I insist that Riley sit beside me since I have no family to keep me company. Traci is with a sitter because she still insists her father is not dead. My child needs to see a psychologist and it is all Brad's fault.

It is terrible to think ill of the dead, which is why I wear sunglasses so no one can make out my real feelings. Let them think my eyes are swollen with tears. I do cry at the drop of a hat when thinking about the poor woman in Canada Brad married and then murdered. I sometimes blame myself for her death. I should have talked to Brad's folks about his mental illness, his split personality, and tried to get him some help. Then I think, *Ronnie, it is not your fault. Brad was Brad, and no one, not even Viola, could have talked him into seeing a psychiatrist.* I should have at least tried though. Maybe that poor woman would be alive. I turned over the bloody knife to the police.

I grieve for the couple of months of wedded bliss when Brad acted so different. I cry into my pillow every night for Brad number two.

I twirl a white rose in my hand. Ha! A devil like Brad should have black roses at his funeral, but my mother-in-law elbowed her way in, like always, and made all of the arrangements. If it was up to me, there would have been no funeral, just Brad's body burned to a crisp in an incinerator and his ashes scattered around a landfill.

The priest recites the usual garbage about the loving wife and all the loved ones Brad left behind. My face tenses, feeling as if pins and needles

are pricking my skin. Oh, God, surely we will not all be together some day, as he claims. Where, in Hades?

Brad's parents are not even civil at a funeral. Viola grabs Ethan's arm and pulls him away from me so they are leaning as far away as possible without falling off their seats. Brad's uncles, aunts, and cousins group together with black umbrellas held high looking like crows.

The guest of honor lies in front of the canopy, ta-da! Brad's coffin is sealed shut and I never have to see that man's face again.

Like a dutiful wife, I drop the white rose on Brad's coffin.

I plop down on a red velvet chair to receive condolences.

"Sorry."

Yeah. Yeah. Next!

"I'm so sorry."

Do not be.

"I'm sorry for your loss."

Why? I'm happy for my loss.

"He was a wonderful man."

He was? Are we talking about the same man?

"Brad was a wonderful father."

Think again, Sherlock.

"He was a great husband."

How would you know? Did Brad marry you, too? Oh, perhaps he murdered you as he did his second wife.

Not one person has the balls to say, "Brad was a girlfriend beater, a wife abuser, a bigamist, and a murderer."

"I'm sorry about your husband," a man says in a deep timbre resonating in my chest.

Someone is walking over my grave. I know that voice! He sounds exactly like Brad but without the Texas twang. I manage to remain calm and murmur, "Thank you, sir, for your condolences."

The man pushes his fedora hat lower on his face. He lowers his umbrella, hiding his face even more. He reaches out and takes my hand.

A bolt of electricity shoots through me. Something about him seems creepy familiar.

He seems reluctant to let go of my fingers and I yank my hand away.

He is the last of the receiving line so believes we have time for small talk. "How is your daughter doing?"

"Traci is all right, considering."

Perhaps he is a reporter from *City Confidential* snooping around. I tilt my head to get a better look at him but he turns away so his face is still in shadows.

Apparently, he cannot think of anything else to say and walks away. He is as broad as Brad was and just as tall. In fact, he is a dead ringer for Brad from behind.

Dead ringer? I sigh at my silliness. I am seeing ghosts. I, also, mistook him for a nosy reporter when all along the man was just being polite and concerned. He simply mouthed the same questions everyone does to the widow of a murdered man left with a small daughter who must miss her daddy.

"How did Brad know the mysterious man?" Riley asks.

"Who? The tall one?" I whisper back.

"He looks familiar but I can't quite place him."

"The man is probably a friend of Brad's or an acquaintance. He didn't say anything about him and Brad being close though."

"Maybe a colleague," she adds.

“Probably. His hands felt like Brad’s, a doctor’s hands. And he had that clean doctor smell about him, like antiseptic, as if he just washed his hands of something.”

“A guilty conscience?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“The way he said, *I’m sorry about your husband*. The man sounded so tortured, almost as if he killed Brad.”

My eyes follow the man to the cemetery exit. He does not look so much guilty as torn to pieces with grief. Maybe he had been close to Brad. His shoulders are rounded, and his back caved in. The man stumbles to his car as if utterly defeated.

Then again, this is a funeral and funerals are always sad, even a funeral for Brad O’Boyle.

September 15, 2015

ZOMBIES ARE REAL. Sometimes it is possible for a corpse to rise from the grave.

* * *

Part 9: The Reckoning

Chapter 69

RONNI

Nine days may be too soon for a widow to clean out her husband's things and empty her house of memories, but then mine was never a conventional marriage.

Suits intended for charity are piled on Brad's bed. A grey and black plaid suit wobbles on top.

Traci storms into the room, climbs on the bed, grabs the plaid suit, and drags it behind her, stomping to the closet.

She stands on her toes, trying to hang the suit back on the rod.

Riley cracks her gum. "Where did you come from half-pint? I was looking for you to give you a stick of chewing gum. Have you been hiding under the bed?"

"Don't throw my daddy's suit out," Traci yells, "he's coming back for it."

Traci is about to cry again and I give her a hug, smoothing the hair from her face. "It's okay, Honey."

She pounds my back with her fists. "Don't throw his suit away. Don't!"

"Alright." I hang up the suit, figuring to throw this one out after Traci's next visit to the psychologist.

"Promise me, mommy." Traci wipes her eyes with the backs of her hands and her voice rattles, breaking my heart.

"I promise, Traci, not to throw this suit out if you promise to go play outside. It's such a lovely day and your daddy would want you to have fun, right?"

Traci nods her head. "Okay, Mommy."

The lone suit hangs in Brad's closet.

Riley is obsessed with the makings of a funeral. I intend to give the guest book to Brad's mother so she can write out *thank you* notes, but Riley insists on sticking her nose in the book and flipping through the pages first to see who attended the viewing. Why, I cannot imagine except maybe she is looking for bachelor doctors.

"What did you say the name was on Brad's travel bag that had the Air Canada luggage tag, the bag with the bloody knife you overnighted to the Canadian police," she says.

I cringe at the memory. "Jayden Tremblay. Why?"

"Well, dear, a Jayden Tremblay from Canada attended Brad's viewing."

"What!" I drop a pair of men's dress shoes on my foot and hop to the bed where Riley is sitting.

"Look here. His name is in the viewing book along with his address in Canada."

The name and address causes me to sputter.

"Cat got your tongue?" Riley says.

"But...but...Brad's double life. The name he was using in Canada. Brad was Jayden Tremblay." I sit down on the bed, feeling faint.

"Someone is playing a sick joke on you."

"I don't know, but I intend to find out."

Riley follows me downstairs to the study.

I flip through the pages of the telephone book and pick up the phone. "I'm calling Air Canada."

"Make a reservation for me," Riley purrs.

I shake my head no and Riley glares at me.

I make a reservation on the next day's flight to Victoria, British Columbia, for one.

Chapter 70

RONNI

Riley still insists on going with me to Canada.

“I need you to stay with Traci. I don’t care to leave her with Brad’s folks and obviously can’t take her with me.”

“You’re going to Canada all by yourself to confront this Jayden Tremblay, if he exists?”

“Yes. I’ll take a can of mace to spray his face with.”

“Be very careful, Ronni. You know nothing about this man except that he knew Brad and may have helped him murder a woman. Maybe someone is after money, you know, a widow, probably a big life insurance policy. This may be a friend of Brad’s in Canada, or an enemy.”

“Well,” I try to sound flippant, “I better pack my bags.”

“Write down what hotel you’re staying at and call as soon as you get there. Check in with me often so I can send the police in case anything happens. It’s a bad world out there and not wise to go knocking on a stranger’s door.”

“Don’t worry, I’m a big girl. I won’t do anything stupid.”

“I just wish someone was going with you,” Riley mutters.

“On Thursday the Good Will is coming to get Brad’s clothes. You heard Traci’s crazy idea about her daddy coming back for the plaid suit. I will just have to keep that suit until Traci quits grieving. I guess she needs something to remind her of her father.”

“I know,” Riley says and smiles gently.

I blink back my tears. “I found a stash of drugs in Brad’s bathroom. He was using drugs with Traci in the house. I should have left him, Riley, years ago.”

“You need to forget Brad. When you return, sell this monster of a house, and make a new start. There. There. Quit crying.”

“Maybe this Jayden Tremblay is Brad’s drug dealer, his Canada connection.”

“Now you are really worrying me.” Riley pulls up the web page of the Victoria police and writes down the phone number. “Just in case,” she says and hands the piece of paper to me.

Chapter 71

JAYDEN

A *For Sale* sign was plastered to the window of my condominium. I already made an offer on a house and planned moving in a week.

New carpet was laid in the entire house, and every spot of Vanessa's blood cleaned. I had moved my clothes and stuff into one of the spare rooms and kept the door to the master bedroom closed. I could barely stand to drive my car into the empty garage without seeing Vanessa's Porsche looking like a pink valentine.

I sat slumped on the den sofa, my suit rumpled and tie loosened. My eyes were bloodshot. Cold containers of open Chinese food were scattered about the coffee table.

Besides my own patients, I had been filling in for other doctors, working myself to the point of exhaustion in order to sleep. I, also, worked at a children's hospital on Sundays for free to earn some sort of forgiveness for my sins. I was not turning into a saint. Work kept me away from the house. Booze helped a little, too, but I only drank after work. I drowned my sorry life with help from Jimmy Beam and a six-pack of beer chaser, hoping to pass out and get some sleep.

Tonight, I returned home earlier than usual, 7:30 pm. The nurses and other doctors literally chased me from the hospital, insisting I go home and get some rest; quit getting on everyone's nerves. They all knew the police had arrested me for a murder I did not commit, and that my girlfriend married my identical twin brother who lived in America and was now dead. God, I hate pity!

Vanessa's father tried to throw the book at me, but the police decided my time behind bars was punishment enough and so I did not lose my medical license, nor did the police report me to the airlines for flying under Brad's name.

My parents were kind enough to drop the subject of me exchanging places with my brother and messing with other people's lives.

Masquerading. Manipulating. Fooling my parents. Deceiving my patients. And especially, making a fool of Ronni...always Ronni, in the back of my mind, behind my heart, beneath my stomach. I had to move on and stop thinking about Ronni and my niece, quit fantasizing about visiting Traci. It was better this way, and Ronni need never know about the cruel joke we played on her. She had enough grief on her plate without another murderer in her life.

No one knew about me killing Brad, of course. The punishment for my sins should not be suicide. No slashing of wrists. No overdose of drugs. No sucking on the car exhaust with the garage door sealed and the motor running. No hanging from the ceiling. No lethal injection of morphine stolen from the hospital. There were at least 100 painless ways to kill myself but nope; I planned to live a long life to remember my sins.

Booze was a handicap to get over this hump, no make that mountain, and move into the new house and attempt a fresh start. The reason I was not living at a hotel or with my parents was to punish myself. Here, in this house, I could imagine Brad and Vanessa together. Then I would see Brad killing her, hear her screaming, and see the shock on her face in those last moments before dying when Brad brandished the knife, but Vanessa believed it was I. Thinking about her death made me feel better about murdering my brother.

I reached for the whiskey again.

It took a few rings of the doorbell before realizing I was not hearing angel's bells because Vanessa had just gone to heaven but that someone was actually at my door.

The ringer was persistent and each ring of the bell caused my head to pound. "Coming," I finally yelled.

Who the hell is it? I tucked my shirt into my pants and staggered to the door. I did not invite anyone over, ever. "Leave me in peace. Just go away." I rubbed my forehead against the door, begging the intruder to, "Please go. Quit ringing the bell. You're driving me crazy!"

Shit! It was probably my buddies come over to cheer me up again by bringing women over. Last Friday night was a fiasco. I woke up in bed the

next morning between two floozies with no recollection of what happened. The women both smiled at me and even given all I had been through, and put others through, and the exhaustion, and the booze, I had still been able to perform admirably. The bottom half of my body was definitely alive.

Whoever was ringing the doorbell was part bulldog.

Probably a damn salesman or Jehovah Witnesses, I thought and flung the front door wide open.

“Ronni?” She came to me, traveled all the way from Austin to find me because she missed me. My heart that I believed dead began to beat and a healthy color returned to my skin until she squeaked, “Brad, you’re alive! You have been hiding in Canada and faked your own death? How? Oh!”

She swayed on her feet and her face drained of color. She was about to faint so I reached out my arms and caught her.

I carried her over to the den, gently spreading her on my couch so she was comfortable with a pillow tucked under her head.

I sat down next to her with one arm leaning against the back of the couch and my hip touching her waist. I no longer felt drunk or tired and my entire being pumped with the excitement of her. Alive! And all because of *her. Her. Her.*

She fluttered her eyes open. Her eyes were dull, like there was no life inside.

She peeked a look at me through her fingers and then sat up and screamed.

“I’m sorry, Ronni,” I quickly said because fear was returning to her pale face that she was looking at her husband’s ghost. “I didn’t mean to scare you like that. I am not Brad. Your husband is dead.”

“You’re Jayden Tremblay,” she said, and pushed herself into the couch.

“I’m Brad’s identical twin brother.”

She reached back her hand and slapped me hard.

“I deserved that.”

She knew, she knew. Recognition dawned in her eyes. She recognized me and I felt exhilarated because this meant there was no need to explain because she knew *everything*, except that I murdered her husband.

And she looked as if she wanted to cut my head off!

“You’re the man from the picture in Brad’s pocket. He lied about a computer trick to place two Brads in the photo. You and Brad played a trick on me. You’re Brad number two, the kind, sensitive, loving Brad, the missing link between Brad number one, my hard uncaring husband of six years and Brad number three, the insane murderer.”

I cringed at the words, *insane murderer*, realizing she did deserve an explanation. I paced while telling her about how we met in Philadelphia, as if talking about a medical experiment gone bad. “I’m different than Brad,” I said defensively.

“You fooled me into thinking you were Brad in order to sleep with me. No, you raped me. Ignorance is not submissiveness. Having sex under false pretenses has got to be rape!” She jumped from the couch, clenching her fists.

“Well, you moaned and groaned under me, lady, so there’s a glitch in your rape theory. You wanted me badly. You writhed in my arms as if I was the drug you craved. You opened your legs and invited me in whether you want to admit it or not.”

She turned beet red. “Was the joke worth it?” she said in a choked voice.

“Ronni, the masquerade started out as funny but believe me, the charade lasted longer because of you.”

“Because I was such a stupid idiot!”

“No, because you were so good in bed.”

“Because I was a whore!”

“No, I’m not wording this right. We never thought how our masquerade would affect other people. It was just supposed to be for two weeks. I never meant...”

“For the joke to last longer, because after you met me you realized how dumb I was, how gullible, and how easy I was to get into bed.”

“You misunderstand.”

“Oh, I understand alright—you made it very clear. You wormed your way into my bed, pretending to be my husband. You and Brad had a good laugh about me!”

“I never told Brad about us. I did not expect to want you like this, to need you like air. I never expected to care about you.”

“Then if you care so much, why didn’t you tell me the truth?”

“The charade got all mixed up. I was in over my head and did not know how to untangle the mess.”

“Oh, so I’m a mess?”

“I didn’t mean...”

“No, you’re the mess, you sick sonofabitch!” She shoved my chest and I fell on the couch.

“I tried to tell you that last night. Remember I told you, I am not who you think I am? I was going to tell you that night at dinner and then...and then...”

“You stood me up.” She closed her eyes and trembled. “The attention you paid to Traci was the cruelest trick of all. Traci refuses to believe her father is dead. She rides that rocking horse you made her for hours. How could you do that to a child? How could you hurt her that way?”

“I never thought...”

“No, I guess you don’t think.” She towered over me where I was sitting. “Just so you get what you want, to hell with the rest of us. You’re just like your brother, a selfish spoiled brat who thinks of no one but himself.”

Her purse had fallen off the edge of the couch. She reached down and picked it up.

I had not explained things correctly, had not expected her to just show up at my door. There was a time when I rehearsed what I planned to say when confessing the truth but weeks and weeks passed, a lifetime ago, and my windpipe rusted with nerves.

All I could think about was *she is leaving me*.

She is walking out on me, which was ironic since Ronni never really walked into my life. She had never really been mine. She was always Brad's wife. She never once said *I want you, Jayden. I need you, Jayden. Good night, Jayden*. I needed to hear her say the words even if I had to force her.

I have to stop her!

Ronni opened the front door and before she could escape, I slammed it shut, trapping her between my arms. She stamped her foot down but I was too fast for her and jumped out of the way.

Tears came to her eyes.

I locked my eyes with hers and tried to look sincere so she would believe me and forget what a liar I was, forget my deception, make her...I felt weak at the knees. She was doing it to me again, making me aware of only her. There was only Ronni. The world narrowed down to her and what she was making me feel. I could barely breathe, could hardly think what to say because I wanted to lose myself in her, open her up like a flower in the morning opening to the sun.

Her eyes glittered. "Oh, no, are you going to rape me again?"

Ouch. That hurt. "Rape?" I snorted. "You enjoyed every second of our lovemaking. You screamed out for more every time. You could not get enough of me. Admit it, Ronni."

"You conceited, arrogant man! I thought you were my husband," she said in a biting voice. "And not my...not my...Oh, my God!"

“It was me Dammit!” I pounded my chest with my fist. “It was me you made love to like you meant it. It was I who made you scream out with passion. I may have answered to my brother’s name but I never acted like Brad. I was always myself whether you want to admit it or not. What did Shakespeare say? A rose is a rose by any other name. I am who I am whether I say my name is Jayden or Brad. A name does not change the person. You can deny me all you want, but I’m still the drug you crave.”

“Screw you and your logic. A creep is a creep by any other name,” she recited in a mocking voice. “That’s not Shakespeare speaking; it’s Ronni O’Boyle, a wronged wife, a harmed sister-in-law, an injured woman.”

I pounded the door with my fists. “I’m not my brother, goddamnit! Get that through your thick head. Brad and I were nothing alike except in physical appearance.”

“Well you sure had me fooled,” she drawled. “That was you skulking around Brad’s funeral, wasn’t it, hiding under an umbrella like the big bad wolf?”

“I wanted to see how you and Traci were doing. I was worried about you.”

“Hah!”

“I had every right to attend my brother’s funeral.”

“Hiding in the shadows? I saw your name in the book at the viewing. I didn’t see you there.”

“So that’s how you got my name and address. I forgot about signing the book at the funeral home and I was not skulking.” I pointed to my face and said, “What was I supposed to do, make everyone think Brad came back to life? I didn’t want to explain.”

“Because you’re a sneaky jerk. If I did not come here looking for you, I never would have known. You would have let me go through life wondering if Brad had a split personality and feeling guilty for that poor woman’s death.”

I flinched.

“And what about Barbie? Did you step into Brad’s shoes with his mistress?”

Ronni cared about me else, she would not appear so hurt. “Say it, Ronni,” I said in a husky voice and massaged her shoulders, slow and sexy. “Say, I want you, Jayden. I need you, Jayden.”

She yanked her shoulders from my grasp. “You think I need you? You think I need any man?”

I reached my hand down to her thigh and crawled up her skirt with my fingers. God help me, she did not stop me. She could not stop the moan rising from her throat because her own body was a traitor.

I breathed heavily into her hair. “I can make you want me.”

I lowered my head and kissed her neck with hot, moist lips.

She pushed her head sideways to give me access and wrapped her arms around me.

I shoved my leg between her knees and pushed her legs open so that she sat on my thigh with her back against the door. I massaged her with my knee in slow sensuous circles.

“I want you, Jayden,” she moaned, her words barely coherent. “You’re right. My body needs and craves you, Jayden.” She panted and closed her eyes.

She was burning for me. Her words excited me beyond belief. It had been so long, forever since we made love and my body pounded with desire, but our reckoning was too important to mess up with just sex. I echoed back her words from several months ago: “Do you believe that a couple can begin again?”

I waited for her answer, swaying on my feet and staring from bloodshot eyes haggard from drink and fatigue. I locked my eyes with hers, demanding her response, staring at her from the same blue eyes of her dead husband, a brother I murdered. *I did it for you, Ronni. I killed for you, to*

protect you. I showed her more than once my love for her by the notes with the roses.

She took a deep, raspy breath. “You can never, ever get me to say I care about you, Jayden. I love you Jayden. You may seduce my body but never my mind, soul, or heart.” Her eyes flashed daggers. “What about Barbie, Jayden?”

She called me by my name just so there was no mistake that she was talking about me, so there could be no confusion about who slept with Barbie when Jayden was dallying in Austin pretending to be Brad.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I said.

“The phone sex? The clever little ploy when you pretended you did not know Barbie was Brad’s girlfriend. You slept with Brad’s wife, surely you must have kept Brad’s girlfriend happy when you were in Austin posing as your brother. Barbie would be less of a moral lapse than a wife, less of a guilt trip, and more pleasurable. After all, who can resist the exquisite Barbie?”

“She’s not exquisite,” I said in a flat voice. “You have nothing to be jealous of. Barbie is nothing to me. I do admit she threw herself at me, but I never fucked her.”

“No, you fucked me over.” She shook her head and tears clouded her eyes. “I would have to care about you to be jealous.”

I brought my face closer to hers and emphasized my words. “I don’t want any other woman. Only you. Just you.”

“I don’t care a fig about you, Jayden Tremblay,” and her bottom lip trembled.

“Stay with me.”

“I...I...I have to go.”

“Get to know me.” I reached out a hand and touched her cheek as if she was a rare flower.

“I hate you!” She slapped my hand away and slung her purse across her shoulder.

I did not try to stop her from leaving nor even ask where she was staying.

Chapter 72

JAYDEN

I poured another drink. I was back to before she ever rang my doorbell and feeling even more sorry for myself. Ronni left me with a hurting heart. I had wanted her to care about me, respect me, and say that she thought I was a decent human being.

There was nothing I could do or say that would make her not resent me. She was right—a creep is a creep is a creep by any other name, by any disguise.

I did not want to think about the niece I left behind, the most innocent one in our charade. Traci felt like a daughter and abandoning her caused guilt, loss, and grief.

The doorbell rang again.

I flung the door open and then leaned casually against the door, one eyebrow lifted, hiding my pain behind an arrogant mask.

“Oh, get that grin off your face, you jackass,” Ronni said. “My, uh, cell phone is dead. Can I borrow your phone so I can call a taxi?”

“I’ll take you to your hotel.”

“Your offer of a ride is unnecessary,” she stuttered.

“Oh, I think it is a necessity. You came all the way to Canada on my account. The least I can do is drive you safely back to your hotel.”

I grabbed her arm and escorted her into the garage. I slammed my fist against the garage door opener and the heavy door opened, letting moonlight shine into the garage.

After treating her roughly, I opened the passenger car door and bowed like a gentleman.

Ronni merely stood there watching me mock her and rubbing her arms as if she froze inside.

“Are you afraid to ride in a car with me, Ronni?” I secretly fumed at her mistrust. I could have screwed her earlier when she lay on the couch helpless or when she leaned against the door, moaning for me. It had taken all my self-control to resist my urges. I could no longer settle for just sex with Ronni. From now on, she would have to come to me of her own free will. I was tired of skulking about, *her words*, and hiding under an umbrella. I really intended to drive Ronni back to her hotel, leave her there for good, and get on with life.

I pushed her onto the car seat immediately regretting my rough treatment.

“Your car is a black Mercedes, just like Brad's car,” she said in a nervous voice.

I patted the hood of the car. “The devil's transport. Like all identical twins, Brad and I have, had, a lot in common. We were once the same zygote in our mother's womb until we split in two. He went his way and I went mine, but we both ended up buying the same year and model. We have the same tastes.”

“Like having phone sex with Barbie Simpson,” she muttered.

“That was Brad, not me.” I slammed the car door shut and the car rocked on its tires.

I floored the gas and backed out of the garage rather recklessly. “Put on your seat belt; it's going to be a rough ride.”

Her hands were shaking when she snapped on the seat belt.

“Ronni, why did you come all the way to Canada to see me? Do you personally visit everyone in Brad's viewing book from the funeral home to thank them for coming to the services?”

“I saw your name and address much earlier on Brad's travel bag with Air Canada travel tags. The bag had a bloody knife in it.”

My leg tensed and the Mercedes gained speed.

“Did you know Brad had a wife in Canada?” she said.

“Yes,” I said and my voice sounded strained. “I prefer not to talk about Vanessa.”

“Yes,” she said in a flat voice, “I know what Brad did.”

We drove the rest of the way in silence but I was aware of her seated beside me every millimeter of the way. I felt her the way I sensed my own heart beating, my own lungs breathing, and my own brain jumping about.

In no time at all, I jerked the car onto the parking lot of the Chateau Victoria Hotel.

“How did you know where I'm staying?” she said suspiciously.

I reached into my pocket, yanked out a business card of the hotel, and threw the card at her. “This dropped out of your purse,” I snapped. “So you see, Ronni, I know where you're staying anyway, whether I give you a ride or not.” I twisted the car into a parking spot and slammed on the brake. “Are you still frightened?” I leaned across to her, one hand on the steering wheel, my other arm across the seat, and my thumb a hairline away from her neck.

“No.” She shrugged her shoulders.

“You little liar,” I said, chuckling. “You're scared of how I make you feel.”

“Shut up,” she said and I laughed even harder, crueller, recalling her words. *As long as you get what you want, to hell with the rest of us. You are just like your brother, a selfish spoiled brat who thinks of no one but himself.*

Why deny myself what I know she really wanted? She was tense from my presence, tied up in knots. Sex would ease the tenseness she was feeling and relax her body so she would be numb and tingly all over.

Ronni accused me of being a selfish spoiled brat and to hell with everyone else. I would never hear any kind words from her and certainly did not need any more shit from her. I should just live down to her expectations, and think of myself, my wants, my needs, and I needed her so

desperately I ached. All my blood seemed to rush to one part of my body so that I was heavy and filled with lust for her.

I would never see Ronni again after tonight any way. She would fly out of my life. Why not say good-bye to my beloved sister-in-law with fireworks? One more time for the road, for old time's sake, right here in the car, in *my* car, not my brother's vehicle.

The parking spot was dark and deserted. Maybe self-consciously I chose to be alone in the dark with her. Things were already so wrong between us what did it matter? If she thought me a monster, then why not be one? Why not act like an animal with her in my black Mercedes where she was practically tied to the seat to get her to be alone with me?

Her proximity and the smallness of our surroundings made my head spin. The air in the car was narrow and I could smell her sweat pouring into my own skin mixing with my own body fluids, causing my blood to pound even harder, to rush even faster. There. To the center of my being, to that part of my universe that wanted, needed, so desperately to make love to her.

My heavy breathing must have signaled my intentions. She grabbed the door handle but I was faster. I pushed the *lock* button on the driver's seat and then the *child-lock* button, trapping her.

She mewed in fright when I turned on the seat to face her, the leather of the seat squeaking like her heart.

I pinched her chin, twisting her head to look at me. "Say my name." My voice sounded as if my tongue was swollen. "Say it."

"Jay...Jayden." My name came out like a moan.

I unbuckled my seat belt and reached an arm across, unbuckling her belt. I left my hand on her hip, and her breathing grew shallow, hot, raspy.

I massaged her hip feeling the heat of her skin through her skirt. She was burning up for me.

I pulled her towards me and she did not resist.

I lowered my head to hers, gently kissing her lips.

She surprised me by clutching my shoulders and pushing her mouth tighter against my lips, shoving her tongue in my mouth. She reached for my belt buckle.

Ah, she is horny hot, burning up for me. I poked beneath her skirt and she ripped my shirt open.

She was moist and weeping, wanting more, as if she could not get enough of me. She whimpered, begging me to make love to her, humping her crotch against my hand.

I crawled over the armrest, pushed the seat down, and lay on top of her, grinding against her. “Ronni,” I breathed into her ear. “Say that you want me, Jayden. Let me hear the words. Say it. Say my name.”

She lifted her hands and pounded my back with weak fists. She was not resisting me. Her hits were fuck-me punches. Her fists began to slow even as the lower half of her body grew stronger and pushed towards me. She craved me inside her and her leg moved between mine.

My fingers crawled beneath the band of her panties rubbing her until she was panting, nearly crying. I removed my hand and she begged me not to stop.

I rested my weight on the seat and she grabbed me by my shirt, pulling me even closer. “I...want you, Jayden. Please.”

“Say that you need me as much as I need you,” I said in a raw voice. “Say it. Say my name.”

“Damn you, Jayden,” she moaned. “Damn you for touching me. Damn you for your lips against my neck, your hand rubbing my hair, your body pressing into mine. Damn you for your smell. Your touch.”

I was assaulting her senses, knocking down her defenses. She was moist there, crying there for me, wanting more of me, all of me. I humped against her, making sure she felt my arousal rubbing against her clit almost bringing her to the summit and then I stopped moving.

“I...I need you, Jayden. Please. Please.” She pushed her body upwards towards me, begging me, breathless, her chest heaving, her fingers pulling

at me, grabbing me, trying to force me to make love to her.

I was not stupid enough to ruin the moment by trying to make her say she loved me. Instead, I gave her what she wanted, what she was begging him for, what we both needed.

And it seemed right. The act was beautiful. It seemed like love, unlike seduction, until she said the words...

"I hate you, Jayden." She spit the words at me when we were both sated, while she straightened her clothes.

I cringed at her words while zipping up my pants. My hands shook because though I may have the power to make her want me, she had the power to hurt me, to cut my heart in two. I was tired, so damned tired.

I slammed my fist on the *unlock* button of the car, and before Ronni could open the door I leaped out of the seat and was already there, yanking her door open. "Get out," I told her a lot rougher than intended.

Ronni would have tripped over my shoes had I not taken a step back to avoid any contact.

I hung my head like a kicked dog and tucked my shirt into my pants. I continued to look at the pavement and said, "Don't be frightened of me, Ronni. I would never intentionally hurt you."

"You already have," she said and slammed the car door. She was crying.

I heard her tears and felt her sorrow cutting me like a knife. I could not look at her as I shuffled around the car with my head bowed low and shoulders slumped. I wanted to let her know how much I loved her, but Ronni acted as though I took her against her will. Why did I always feel such guilt with this woman, even now that she knew whom I really was? Ronni had begged me to make love to her. She called me by *my* name. She begged Jayden to take her.

I pounded the steering wheel with my fist instead of beating my head. *What devil came over me that I seduced her—again? Why did I have to*

prove my power over her? Because she hurt me by saying, she could never love me.

My own eyes were damp when I started up the car. I sped away and left Ronni standing in the parking lot, hugging her purse to her breast, watching me leave her.

As if she gives a damn about me, I thought, wallowing in self-pity. I did not even tell her good night. I just used her like some cheap whore and then kicked her out of the car. *Yeah, I really love you, Ronni*. I made her feel dirty, like a lusty teenager with raging hormones, in my car of all places, my black Mercedes, the devil's car. I swore to take the car in tomorrow and trade it in!

Only...only, the upholstery now smelled like Ronni.

Oh, Jesus, now what! I could not get the picture out of my mind of Ronni limping in the parking lot over to the hotel because like a tarnished Cinderella, she left behind one high-heel shoe in my car.

One shoe to kick me in the ass and make me feel like an even bigger heel than I already was!

Chapter 73

RONNI

The hotel staff stares with raised eyebrows as I stagger into the hotel with one shoe on.

I hope my other shoe kicks him in the balls, as I should have.

My hair is in disarray, my clothes wrinkled, my mascara smeared, my cheeks wet with tears, and I am puffing on an asthma inhaler. I hate him for making me weak and damn myself for wearing a skirt that made me so accessible. My body betrayed me again, ready and willing to let the enemy crawl inside me. Instead, I should have kicked his butt for all his lies. My self-respect vanishes when around him, the way he makes me lose control.

I jerk off my high-heel and throw the shoe across the hallway.

In my room, I stuff the skirt and blouse in the trash. If not for the fire monitor in the room, I would burn the material.

While he was driving, I should never have brought up Barbie again, accusing him of lying about having sex phone with her as if I am a jealous fishwife. I am always vulnerable where Barbie is concerned, even now when she is out on bail for murdering Brad. Jayden denied Barbie once again and said, "She's not exquisite, you are. My brother was the biggest fool who ever lived to prefer Barbie to you. I have not slept with any other women since meeting you, Ronni, not in Austin or Canada. I do not want any other woman." My heart flipped at his words even though Jayden stared at me with eyes as blue as Brad's eyes had been, the same eyes of my dead, cheating husband.

He said Brad's name with such hatred. I had thought their relationship closer and my visions of Brad and Jayden, their heads together laughing about me, changed. Jayden sounded as if there was no love lost between him and Brad, and I believed his words of wanting only me, and thought *he does have a heart after all*. With his hair sticking up from his head like a little kid, he looked younger, more approachable and so he seduced me again.

I jump in the shower and scream. Damn me for not charging my cell phone!

I scrub my skin of his touch.

Damn him and his lovemaking, his expertise with women, his cockiness, and his velvet tongue spewing words made of rose petals.

Damn the sparkle in his eye when my body first betrayed an unbearable lust for him.

I lean my forehead against the shower stall, cooling my brain, trying to stop my heart from beating so fast. *Oh, God, and to think all this time he was my brother-in-law!* He did not even say good night. Good-bye! See you later, Ronni! Have a good life, woman! He just threw me out of his car.

I huddle on the shower floor, hugging my knees and letting the hot water run out.

Ah, the cold water feels good. I am still so frickin' hot.

I lay down on the wet tile in the fetus position, thinking of spending the night in the shower with cold water for company.

My skin breaks out in goosebumps, my hair is soaking wet, and frigid water splashes me. It is only the thought of dying from pneumonia and leaving Traci an orphan that makes me rise to my knees.

I dry my hair with the dryer and blow my body with the heat, trying to warm up, my teeth chattering in my stupid head.

I wish to God I had never come to Canada, and left Jayden Tremblay buried with Brad.

You enjoyed every second of our lovemaking. You screamed out for more every time. You could not get enough of me. Admit it, Ronni.

I rub my cheek against the damp pillow.

I thought you were my husband.

I thought you were my husband.

Chapter 74

RONNI

Riley is waiting for me at the front door with a huge grin on her face.

“What's so funny?” I do not mean to snap at her but sleep eluded me last night and the flight was a bumpy ride.

Riley drags me into the den and points to a magnificent flora arrangement on the table. “These came for you, this morning.”

There are bouquets of red, white, and black roses—blood, virginity, death. Only one man of my acquaintance prefers the red, white, and the black. The colors sum up my brother-in-law, make that ex-brother-in-law. I never got the chance to divorce Brad and am actually his widow, but prefer to think of Brad as my ex because the thought of being related to Jayden Tremblay in any way, is upsetting, to say the least.

Riley yanks the heart-shaped note from the flowers, shoving the paper under my nose.

Please accept my apologies, Mrs. O'Boyle, but your beauty swept me away.

Always.

Dr. Jayden Tremblay

Riley peeks over my shoulder. “What happened between you and the Canadian doctor that he was swept away?”

Jayden is not really apologizing for last night. He is boasting like a proud cock. Riley will hound me forever so I give her the skimpiest details about Jayden being Brad's identical twin. “Oh, quit looking at me like that. Yes, it was Dr. Tremblay sleeping in my bed pretending to be Brad.”

“Do you want me to throw out the flowers then?”

“Yes,” and I run up the stairs before she can see my tears.

Several days later, a high-heel is delivered in a silver box. The asshole even has the nerve to put the shoe on a purple velvet cushion, along with a note: *Here is your shoe. I thought you might be missing its soul mate. As always, your prince.*

Ha-ha very funny! The prince of darkness mailed me my wayward shoe, which no longer matches its mate. The shoe Jayden sent is polished with a new heel hammered on. What a creep! He sprinkled aftershave on the shoe, and now I cannot get his smell out of my head, *Eau de Diablo*. What kind of man does that to a woman he kicked out of his car after screwing her?

My intention is to throw the pair of shoes away but when I pop open the lid of the trashcan, one hand shoves the shoe that smells like Jayden to my nose, and my left hand hugs the other shoe to my chest. My head hangs low and my nostrils dip into the shoe and inhale the scent of my brother-in-law. I giggle at his note and cheekiness. *Creep*, I think but a bit kinder, a tad gentler...

Until Jayden sends me another package, this time delivered by a lawyer.

The legal document proclaims that Dr. Jayden Tremblay is suing Ronni O'Boyle for visitation rights of his niece, Traci O'Boyle, the daughter of his recently deceased brother, Brad O'Boyle.

"Can he do this?" I ask his lawyer and lick my lips because my mouth dries up like a prune.

"Dr. Tremblay can spend his money on many frivolous lawsuits, including paying me to stand on your doorstep in case you have questions."

"You said the lawsuit is frivolous, implying he doesn't have a leg to stand on."

"Ah, contraire, Mrs. O'Boyle. Dr. Tremblay has two legs to stand on. He is your dead husband's only blood relative besides your daughter. He is the only blood link to her father. He is..."

"Please don't go on; I get your point."

“Dr. Tremblay has every legal right to see his niece.”

“No. No! This is a nightmare. I cannot have this man in my life. I can't, I...”

“Have a good day.” He slams my door in my face.

I burn the high-heels in a bonfire in the backyard, dancing around the fire and shaking my head like a crazy woman. I even shuffle around the circle using Zumba moves.

“It's hard ain't it?” Riley cracks her gum as we watch the flames and smell the burning scent of leather shoes. She appears more amused than sorry for me. In fact, Riley is laughing. “The idea of visitation rights makes you so uncomfortable because he is your brother-in-law and you've slept with him. Jayden Tremblay is like having an ex-husband. Honey, Brad, did not die after all; you divorced him as Jayden.”

I feel dizzy, about to pass out. “He wants visitation rights until Traci is 18. That's nearly 12 years of him coming over here.”

“Well, is he willing to pay child support for the privilege?”

“Of course not. Traci's support is not an uncle's responsibility. Traci does not even know she has an uncle. Oh, God, what do I tell Traci? This would really screw her up if he wins in court.”

“The man lives in Canada. What is the worst that can happen?”

“He flies to Austin and visits Traci once a year.” I plop down on the couch, gripping my sweating armpit. I shall have to hire a lawyer, and Brad left a mound of gambling debts, and an expensive drug habit. By the time his estate was settled, there was not even money left to send Traci to college. Brad's parents will not help. Viola and Melvin disowned Traci. They blame me for not being a good wife and forcing Brad to marry another woman.

Brad's indebtedness is the main reason a *For Sale* sign is on the front yard. With the equity, I plan to buy a smaller house in a cheaper neighborhood. I removed Traci from private school. She is happier in public school any way. I have one more semester of dental assistant school but if I

hire a lawyer because of Jayden Tremblay, I shall have to quit school and get a job.

Chapter 75

RONNI

About three months to the day Jayden sues for visitation rights, we sit in a courtroom in Austin at opposing tables. I do not mention Jayden's impersonation of Brad and pretend to have never met him before. More than once during the proceedings Jayden cocks his head at me with a curious expression and I sneer at him.

We have both given our points of view on the subject of Traci's only blood relation on her father's side being allowed to be a presence in her life. Jayden's lawyer ends his presentation with the words, "And what blood can be thicker than that of an identical twin brother?"

The judge puts on his spectacles and I wait with baited breath for his ruling. Jayden merely plays with a pencil, acting as if he does not care either way.

"In the case of Jayden Tremblay versus Ronni O'Boyle," the judge says in a booming voice.

We both lean forward on our seats.

"I rule for the Plaintiff."

Boom! The judge's gavel comes down and my face drains of all color.

Jayden breathes a sigh of relief.

"Jayden Tremblay will be allowed visitations rights to see the child Traci O'Boyle, his niece, every other Saturday from ten in the morning until Sunday at six in the evening, at which time the child will be returned to her mother, Ronni O'Boyle," the judge further declares.

I grab a glass of water, choking and coughing, trying to clear my throat. Quick, I recover my composure and whisper to my attorney.

My lawyer stands and bellows, "Your Honor, my client does not understand how Dr. Tremblay plans to see his niece every other weekend when he lives in Canada. She believes Traci to be too young to make such a

long trip by herself if that is what Dr. Tremblay expects. Nor does it make any sense that he fly up here Friday nights merely to fly back Sunday night. She believes Dr. Tremblay is not serious about his commitment to his niece and the lawsuit frivolous. Dr. Tremblay will do more harm than good in her child's life by promising to visit Traci and then standing the child up."

Jayden fidgets on his seat and I smile meanly at him. Bingo! I win after all.

"She believes that in the long run Dr. Tremblay will break her daughter's heart," my attorney adds.

Jayden throws a pencil at the floor, aimed at me.

I mouth the words, *you will because you have a track record.*

Jayden leans back on his chair, giving me a lazy look, pretending to be unconcerned by my ploy. He picks up another pencil and knocks the pencil against the table as if he is playing a song only he can hear.

"You may sit down, Counselor," the judge orders my lawyer.

Jayden's attorney stands to his full height. "There is no reason for Mrs. O'Boyle to have concerns. Since Dr. Tremblay filed suit, he has moved from Canada to San Marcos."

All the blood rushes from my face. San Marcos is a short 40 minutes away from South Austin where I live!

Jayden snickers at me.

Oh, take that smug look off your face just because you won. I throw a pencil and it lands on the eraser tip bouncing off the end of his table.

He mouths the words, *is that your best shot, Ronni?* He then laughs! Damn him to hell!

My feet are practically flying when I leave the courtroom. It is quite a trick to run yet walk, but Jayden has longer legs. He is breathing down my neck.

"I'll be by to pick up Traci this Saturday at 10 am."

I glare at him.

“She is my niece. I have every right to see Traci. I love the child.”

“You don't know what love is!”

“Have her ready,” he snaps, “with enough clothes for an overnight visit. I won't be returning Traci until Sunday.”

“But she doesn't even know she has an uncle. You're a stranger to her.”

“Well, I guess you better tell Traci she has an Uncle Jayden then.”

“But you don't know where I live,” I stutter, trying to prolong the inevitable as long as possible. I should have let him go to the old house to get Traci only to discover we moved. The court papers all have my old address, just like his court papers stated he lived in Canada. It is a filthy trick moving to *my* country.

“Oh. I know where you moved to.” Jayden ducks into the elevator, punching the *close door* button.

Jayden leaves me standing at the threshold of injustice, making me wonder just what I have done in a previous life to deserve such punishment.

Chapter 76

RONNI

While packing Traci's bag I explain to my daughter about her uncle.

Traci hangs her head and says, "I don't want to go."

"It will only be for one night, Traci."

"Do I have to?"

"Yes, you must."

Traci has tears in her eyes. I damn Jayden for her suffering. How dare he just waltz into her life again. The man has no idea how easily hurt children are. My own mother walked out on me. He had better not abandon Traci or I will take him back to court and stop his visitation rights, even if it bankrupts me. I snap Traci's suitcase shut, nearly pinching my fingers, vowing to keep a diary of Jayden's visits and Traci's reaction whenever he skips a visit.

Traci is making progress with her psychologist and beginning to accept her father's death. Jayden is bound to screw her up again, and Traci will think her father has risen from the grave. I tried to make the judge understand about Traci and the ordeal my little girl has gone through. The man turned a deaf ear, claiming children are more resilient than adults credit them. As for Jayden, he stood like a statue when hearing about Traci's delicate emotional state. The man is made of stone and has no compassion for even a child.

The hands of the clock move, as if my hanging is coming instead of my dead husband's lookalike.

At ten o'clock sharp, the doorbell rings.

I take my sweet time opening the door.

Jayden dips his head. "Hi."

"You are the lowest of the low," I hiss. "Don't you dare take one step into my house! You may have won visitation rights with Traci, but not the

right to trespass.”

“Uh.” He scratches his ear like a monkey.

“Ha! You have fleas like the dog you are.”

He rolls his eyes. “Is Traci ready?”

“Traci,” I yell, “your uncle is here.” I point my fingers at my eyes and then at his eyes to indicate that I am watching him with an eagle eye. “She’ll be down in a minute.” I slam the door in his face.

He keeps ringing the doorbell, driving me crazy.

“What do you want?” I scream and fling the door open.

He rubs his nose. “Look, can’t we be civil for Traci’s sake. You could have broken my nose if I hadn’t been faster and jumped back, if I hadn’t been expecting your venom,” he says through gritted teeth. “I know you beneath your skin, Ronni.”

I blush.

“I can damn well read your mind,” he adds.

“Well read this,” and I throw him a dirty finger.

“The child is worth the abuse at the hands of the mother, so bring it on, Ronni.”

Traci shuffles her feet to the front door, dragging her wheeled Minnie Mouse suitcase behind her.

I kiss my daughter’s cheek. “Don’t worry, Honey, your Uncle Jayden isn’t going to hurt you.”

“Jesus!” Jayden swears.

I whisper to him, “Is the bachelor playboy doctor really going to devote every other Saturday night to his niece or are you going to stand her up? You may fool the judge with your sincerity but I know what a liar you are and how deceitful. I know *you* beneath your snakeskin.”

Traci nearly knocks me over when she charges through the door and wraps her arms around Jayden's knees. "Daddy," she screams.

This is exactly the behavior I feared.

Jayden picks her up in his arms and hugs my little girl. The man is a good actor—he has tears in his eyes. "Traci, forgive me, Sweetheart, for ever leaving you!" and he spins her around, both of them laughing.

He sets her down, patting her head. I whisper in his ear, "Traci is confused and you damn well better straighten my daughter out right now. You're not my husband, you creep, and you never were."

His face flushes red and he confesses, "I'm not your daddy, Traci. I'm your Uncle Jayden."

"I've got an uncle," Traci yells in an excited voice and hugs his legs. "He's my daddy."

"No." Jayden lifts his eyes to me. "I'm your father's twin brother."

"I know you're not really my daddy but I like you better. Can I call you daddy?"

"Uh, it's up to your mommy." Jayden gives me a wide grin and wiggles his eyebrows.

The jerk is enjoying goading me. He told the judge his niece needs a father figure in her life. Damn the judge. Damn the courts. Damn. Damn. Damn.

"Mommy, can I, please?"

"You may call him Uncle Jayden, which he is."

Love for her uncle shines in Traci's eyes and an ugly jealousy swells my chest. My daughter has not been this happy since the last time Jayden posed as my husband and her father. *My own daughter is a traitor. Traci has gone over to the enemy's side.*

Moreover, to seal the deal, Jayden lifts a bag from the porch and offers Traci a stuffed tiger, Tigger actually from the Winnie the Pooh collection.

Traci hugs Tigger to her chest and beams at Jayden. "Thank you. What about Mommy? Did you bring my mommy flowers?"

I widen my eyes in shock, wondering if Traci knows about Jayden's masquerade.

"No, uh," Jayden says, locking his eyes with mine. "I don't think your mommy likes my flowers."

I simply swallow, not daring to confess that a red rose, a white rose, and a black rose are preserved in the freezer. The red rose is my heart that he froze, the white rose my innocence he took, and the black rose my death upon discovering his masquerade and betrayal. Now, this man is taking my daughter away, separating me from Traci, even if it is only for 32 hours. I hate him even more for forcing himself on us.

"Are you going to be alright, Mommy?"

I stare straight at Jayden and answer, "Oh, don't worry about me, Traci. I've got lots of good friends to keep me company, very good friends."

I hit my mark. Jayden looks as if he wants to hit me. Let him think I sleep around. My life is none of his business.

My bravado lasts but a minute as Jayden takes Traci's hand and walks her to his car.

He turns and looks at me standing by myself shrunken. He bends down and whispers to Traci.

She runs over to me, kissing my cheek. "I'll be back soon, Mommy. Don't cry."

"I'll miss you, Sweetie." Traci has never spent the night away from me except for that night in Victoria. I cringe at the remembrance. I do not want to think about that night in his Mercedes. "Be kind to my daughter," I tell him and he gives me a peeved look.

Traci runs back to Jayden and jumps in his new Mercedes, which is red, another color for the devil. The man has merely shed his skin. He is taking my daughter away from me.

Traci chatters away to Jayden, as if she has known him all her life.

Jayden throws back his head and laughs at something Traci says as he backs out of the driveway.

I have never felt so alone in all of my life.

Chapter 77

RONNI

Riley nudges me with her elbow at Traci's soccer game. "Look who's here, your ex."

"Dr. Tremblay is not my ex-anything," I snort. It is bad enough he shows up every other Saturday like clockwork to pick up Traci, but now he is at the soccer field. Austin has become too small for the two of us.

He walks by and our eyes meet for a brief second. His blue shirt has the first couple of buttons open and his chest hair sticks out. I have taken in all of Jayden with one roll of my eyes.

There is so much I do not know about the man even though I have been more intimate with him than with any other human being. The things I let him do to me and the sex acts I did to him make me blush, yet he is like a stranger. Well, I courted his indifference and have not been any friendlier since the first Saturday he picked up Traci.

Traci has asked me, "Why don't you like my Uncle Jayden, Mommy?"

Of course, I cannot tell her about how Mommy ended up sleeping with Daddy's brother. Traci was able to tell Brad and Jayden apart all along. Last Saturday she yelled at her uncle to wait and then ran up the stairs and came back down carrying that accursed suit she said belonged to her daddy. Traci then handed the suit to Jayden and ran back to get her suitcase.

He turned to me with a sheepish expression on his face and said, "I, uh, guess last time I slept in your house, I forgot my suit."

What Jayden should have said was, "I, uh, guess last time I fucked you, pretending to be your husband, I forgot my suit."

The sound of his tennis shoes climbing the stairs of the bleachers takes my breath away. There is still a sick chemistry between us and though he is five rows behind me, my heart skips two beats and drums a warm, oozing feeling all the way down from my throat, settling between my legs.

A rush of desire weakens my knees. I resist the sudden urge to cross my legs because it might be obvious to him if he is watching. I long to ask Riley to turn around and see if Jayden is looking at me, but am petrified she will laugh.

Riley can sense my tension and rubs my shoulder. "You sure about Dr. Tremblay not being your ex? After all, you had an affair with him."

"Not an affair. Remember, I thought he was Brad when we slept together."

"How about in Canada, huh?"

"Canada was only one time so I wouldn't call it an affair," I emphasize in a flat voice.

"More like a one-night stand then?"

"He forced me in Canada."

"Uh-huh. Raped you did he?"

"Not exactly rape, but he took advantage of me."

"Yeah." Riley leans back against the bleachers. "Guys take advantage of me like that all the time 'cause they know I'm horny. Well, honey, if you don't want your brother-in-law, I guess you don't mind me taking a crack at the stud then?"

"What?" My hand shakes in the popcorn bag.

"Legally he is not your ex so it's not like I'd be sleeping with your husband. How about you set me and him up? Unless Jayden has been getting his rocks off on that blonde he's talking to. Who is she, another single mom? I bet the Canadian is horny as hell and if I don't hump his bones then another woman will." She smiles at the look of dismay on my face.

"You are tacky, Riley; I did have a relationship with Jayden."

"Ah, so now it was a relationship."

“Yes, but it’s complicated. How can you even ask me to set you up with him? You and I are best friends. You dating Jayden would be like incest.”

“Incest? Kind of like you sleeping with your brother-in-law?”

“Sleeping with Jayden was not incest. He is no blood relation of mine.”

“According to the Bible, in-laws having sex is incest. I looked it up, sugar.”

“Don’t sugar me! How can you even think of chasing after Jayden when you know how I feel about him?”

“And that would be?” She pops a bubble of gum, offering me a stick.

“You know I hate him.” I shove her gum back at her.

“Uh-huh.”

“I can’t have my best friend sleeping with a man I hate. We couldn’t be friends any more if you slept with Jayden.”

“Oh, I’d never let a man come between us, Ronni. Besides, Jayden has his hands full with your neighbor.”

Over at the concession stand, Jayden is talking to Millie Smith, a neighbor across the street from me whose little girl is friends with Traci. Millie should have been named Maxie. She is a five-foot ten inch Amazon, mostly legs, wearing cowgirl boots, which stretch her to six feet tall. Red hair sweeps her buttocks and orange western pants are so tight on her to appear as if she painted the denim on.

“Wasn’t Millie recently divorced?” Riley says.

“Uh-huh. Six months ago.”

“Well, she sure looks hungry for a man, and I should know. It’s the first year that is the hardest when a woman struggles to see if she can ever attract men again.”

“Her husband left her for another woman,” I add.

“Worse. Poor woman has to prove she can get a man into bed. The first year of freedom, a woman is on the rebound and liable to marry the first eligible man who comes her way, no matter if he is a pig. You think your brother-in-law is a pig, right?”

Millie and Jayden stroll towards the bleachers. Jayden holds a coke in his hand and he and Millie sit on the bottom row.

“Yep!” Riley smacks her knee. “Millie has got her hooks in Jayden. Look at her offering him popcorn so their hands can bump in the bag filled with dirty butter and raunchy salt. Mm, by the end of the game, she’ll invite him over to her house for a quickie or two, or three, or four, or five, or six, or seven, or eight, or nine, or...”

“I get your point!”

“Hey, don’t snap at me for being good at math. You do not have to count to infinity to prove Millie’s libido is out of control because she just got divorced. You can bet your boobs that because Millie has a tight ass, he will take Millie up on her offer. Maybe Jayden is at Traci’s game to pick up single horny moms, except for you, of course. Jayden doesn’t have a chance with you, does he Ronni?”

“No,” I mumble. Riley is something of an expert on men. She has slept with hundreds of them, compared to my measly score of two men, my husband, and his brother. Same face. Same body. One zygote. Technically, maybe I had sex with just one man. The sordid mess is still confusing. My voice fills with panic but only because Millie lives across the street from me, “You think Jayden will go home with Millie?”

“Probably. She sure has his attention.”

Traci’s team wins the game and I suffer in silence while she runs past me to her uncle, hugging and kissing him.

Jayden ruffles Traci’s hair and then walks away with Millie.

Only then do I climb down the steps of the bleachers to congratulate Traci.

At the parking lot, Jayden leans against Millie's car, his keys dangling from his hand.

Traci jumps up and down, yelling, "See you later, Uncle Jayden."

He waves at Traci but ignores me as if I do not exist.

I sit in the driver's seat of my car, my face pale. *He is going over to Millie's, across the street from my house.*

Without even thinking, I jump out of the car and elbow my way between Jayden and Millie. "Would you mind picking Traci up thirty minutes early next week for your visit with her?" My voice booms in my ears. "I have an appointment."

"Uh, sure." He looks his nose down at me as if I am a fly crapping on his shoulder. "Whatever you want."

"Fine. Fine then."

"Fine."

"Well, then. Fine," I repeat. "Fine." I walk back to the car with burning ears from eavesdropping on Millie's invitation. "Maybe you can stop by some time, Jayden, after you drop Traci off," she had purred and rubbed her backside against his car.

I rev up the engine of the SUV. All I need is to have Jayden parked at Millie's house day in and day out. When will I ever be rid of that confounded man?

I drop Riley by her house and then drive home.

I hover in the spare bedroom upstairs, spying across the street to see if Jayden will go over to Millie's house.

I feel such a rush of relief when Millie swings into her driveway with no Jayden following behind her.

You are only concerned because he may get it into his head to come over here afterward.

A voice whispers back, why would he come over to see you after having sex with Millie? Why would Jayden want you when he has the Millies of Texas more than willing to satisfy his needs?

I stand at the window for half an hour just to make sure.

I am craving ice cream, but strawberry ice cream is just an excuse. I open the freezer and pull out the red rose frozen from the bouquet Jayden sent from Canada, a rose so like my heart—frigid and cold.

I also kept the note delivered with the flowers.

Please accept my apologies, Mrs. O'Boyle, but your beauty swept me away.

Always.

Dr. Jayden Tremblay.

I stroke the words of the note, attempting to gauge a deeper meaning. Is Jayden really sorry or is the note and flowers an apology for kicking me out of his car after seducing me? Or did the note mean he was sorry for everything else?

I shall never know because I certainly will not ask him now that he has Millie Smith on his mind.

I stuff the red rose back in the freezer and slam the door shut.

All evening I make excuses to stare out the window at Millie's driveway. At this rate, I shall go crazy.

Perhaps I should call Jayden and beg him to stay on his own side of the fence, stop invading my territory, and leave me in peace. Jayden might wonder why I am so upset but even I cannot understand my feelings.

I pick up the phone and dial his number. I am about to hang up the phone when all of a sudden I hear, "Hello."

I do not say a thing; I just breathe.

"Yes?" He sounds impatient.

“Dr. Tremblay,” I say nonchalantly.

“Ronni.” His voice sounds tense.

“When you sent the flowers...” The words are being wrenched from my throat. “...the note—what were you apologizing for?”

“For being so rough on you.”

He hangs up the phone without even saying goodbye. He sent the flowers more than four months ago. What got into me to ask about the note now?

I do not care!

I slam the receiver on the cradle so hard that a piece of plastic flies off and slides across the floor.

Odd, the broken piece is heart-shaped.

Chapter 78

RONNI

The next Saturday morning Traci waits on the porch, her suitcase beside her, her head hanging low, and her stringy blonde hair brushing the sidewalk. It is eleven in the morning.

I just knew Jayden would do this to Traci.

I sit beside her on the front porch. “Honey, why don't you come into the house?”

Traci shakes her head and hugs her Tigger tighter.

The phone rings and I run into the house and answer.

“It's me,” he says. “Sorry I couldn't call sooner. Tell Traci I will be there around one. I have an emergency at the hospital.”

“I'll tell her.”

“Thanks.” He hangs up the phone.

After lunch, Traci goes outside to play with Millie's daughter, Joanie.

I clean out the freezer. My refrigerator and freezer, a side-by-side, is broken and a deliveryman is bringing a new one late this afternoon. I am cleaning out the mess of defrosted food and throwing away food from the refrigerator. I was able to save most of the meat by transferring it to Riley's freezer.

I lose track of time and the doorbell rings.

I should have showered and dressed before Jayden caught me looking like something the cat dragged in out of the rain. Well, I cannot keep him waiting while I pretty myself up. He does not act attracted to me any more anyway. I swing the door open and scowl at him.

“Is Traci here?” he says in a cool voice.

I walk around the house and check the backyard but Traci is nowhere around. Then I remember Traci had been playing with Joanie in the front.

Jayden stands outside, tapping his shoe against the porch floor.

“Traci was playing with Joanie at Millie's house.” I drag the other woman's name from my throat and swallow. “I'll go get her. You stay here.”

Jayden sits on a porch chair, tapping his fingers together and staring aimlessly.

I come back from across the street with Millie.

Jayden smiles at Millie as if glad to see her, unlike me.

Millie must have timed Jayden's visits. She probably grilled Traci about her uncle and knew he was going to be late. She appears to have just come from the beauty parlor. Her skirt is short and tight. Millie wears high-heels at home on a Saturday afternoon. “I don't think the girls could have gone very far,” she says. “They were on their bikes but Joanie knows she is just supposed to just go up the street and back.”

“Traci wouldn't wander very far either,” I add.

We walk up and down the street calling the girls' names.

There is no answer but an older boy; a fifth grader saw the girls. “A while ago.” He points. “They were headed in that direction.”

We walk faster, calling out for the girls.

After about eight minutes, Joanie rides her bike towards us crying. The little girl is muddy.

Traci is not with her.

Chapter 79

RONNI

Millie calms Joanie down and she tells us, “Traci fell into the creek.”

Jayden grabs the little girl by the shoulders. “Take us to where Traci is, Joanie.”

Jayden calls the police on his cell phone while we follow Joanie, running as fast as the little girl's short legs can pedal her bike.

Traci's bike is abandoned on the road.

Jayden reaches out and grabs my hand. I am shaking and crying. “The creek must be full. It's been raining so much.”

“Hush,” he says. “It may not be that bad.”

There are woods in the area and after wandering for about four minutes in the mud, Joanie points to an embankment that is about 25 feet high.

Traci has not fallen into the rushing water below but is stuck, knee-deep in mud. She is crying and filthy but otherwise seems okay.

“It's alright, honey,” Jayden yells at her. “I'll come get you.”

“Here.” Jayden hands me his phone. “Call the police again and tell them where we are. Just do it,” he snaps harshly. It is clear that he is still worried.

He begins the difficult task of maneuvering down the embankment in the thick mud.

Finally, he reaches Traci and she hugs him around the legs.

Jayden digs Traci out of the mud. All the while, he is sinking into the mud.

I sigh with relief at the sound of sirens. There is no way Jayden is going to be able to climb out of the mud without help.

Two police officers and several firefighters form a human chain down the embankment, handing Traci from man to man until she is safely on top of the embankment and no longer in danger.

However, the men cause the mud to loosen even more and Jayden slides towards the creek.

With a splash, he falls into the rushing water and hits his head on a rock.

Chapter 80

RONNI

“Jayden,” I scream. A firefighter holds my arms to prevent me from jumping into the creek. His body rocks in the water face down.

I watch helplessly as the police and firefighters attempt to get to Jayden.

His body knocks against the sides of the creek, stuck between rocks keeping him from being swept away.

More sirens sound and firefighters run to the embankment equipped with ropes and proceed to rescue him.

Jayden appears unconscious from the blow to his head. The water is slightly red and I have never felt so scared in all of my life.

Please God let him be okay.

Finally, one of the firefighters, a brave man, slides all the way down to the creek, risking his own life, and manages to pull Jayden from the water. “He's not breathing,” he yells up to the other men.

My heart stops and I collapse. My world goes black until someone throws her little arms around my neck. I had forgotten about Traci. My daughter buries her face in my neck and we both sob. I hang onto Traci as if she is a lifeline to Jayden. *Please do not let her lose him again. Not again. Do not let my little girl lose her uncle she loves so much. It will break Traci's heart.*

A firefighter ties a rope around Jayden and they pull his body from the creek. I shield Traci's face so that she cannot see her uncle, just in case...in case...

He appears like a corpse. Tears flood my eyes.

I leave Traci with Millie and rush over to Jayden; only I cannot see anything because the firefighters are standing around while a medic works on him.

Finally, Jayden coughs and I sigh with relief, bow my head, and thank the Lord for saving him.

I grab Jayden's hand and squeeze but get no response. Jayden is still unconscious and pale. Who knows what the damage is to his head. There is a nasty cut. He looks like death. "Where are you taking him?" My voice shakes and I can hardly get the words out.

"The closest hospital is the Heart Hospital in Austin," one firefighter answers. "We have to get him to the hospital as soon as possible and check out his lungs and his head."

"His name is Jayden Tremblay."

"Are you coming?" the firefighter asks when they put Jayden in the ambulance. "Are you his wife?"

I was his pretend wife. "He's my brother-in-law, and yes, I am coming with him."

I climb into the ambulance and cling to Jayden's cold hand.

Chapter 81

RONNI

I curl up on a chair in Jayden's hospital room with dried mud all over my clothes. I watch him sleep, wishing he would wake up. The doctors are uncertain if there is permanent damage to his brain. They will not know until he wakes up although his x-rays reveal nothing alarming. Like any head injury where the victim fails to wake up, there is always the danger Jayden might remain in a coma indefinitely. His chest rises with blessed breath. His lungs are okay, probably a little scarring.

Guilt overwhelms me remembering the hurt look on his face when I told him he did not know what love is. Jayden treats Traci with so much love and kindness. He watches her silly shows with her and takes her to children's movies that must make him squirm in his seat. He is willing to give up every other Saturday and part of his Sunday to be a surrogate father.

Jayden even bought a child car seat for Traci so she rides safely in his Mercedes, a red devil's car, but Jayden is not so much a devil. He is missing a tail and not perfect, like myself.

I doze occasionally and then wake with my throat tight and rasping for breath. I only relax when his chest moves.

Just after sunrise, Jayden moans. His eyelids flutter.

I run to get the nurse and yell out, "He's waking up!"

A doctor and nurse walk briskly into the room and Jayden opens his eyes fully.

"Good morning, Dr. Tremblay," the doctor says.

Jayden mumbles.

"Can you excuse us?" the doctor asks me.

I hang my head and shuffle out the door like an old woman.

After about half an hour, the doctor walks out of the room and closes the door.

“Will he be okay?” I say.

“He has a slight concussion, but nothing serious, Mrs. Tremblay.”

“I’m not his wife!” Everyone always assumes our relationship forcing me to explain, “I’m his sister-in-law.”

“Oh?”

The doctor looks at me strangely because I spent the night at the hospital in his room, which seems very devoted for a sister-in-law. Nevertheless, I say, “Did he ask you not to let me see him?”

“He said nothing about you. Good day.”

Jayden is out of danger and I press the elevator button.

Chapter 82

RONNI

I pull my car up the driveway next to the red Mercedes, intending to make sure his car is locked, and his possessions protected, but instead I climb into the Mercedes and sit on the front passenger seat. I look over at the driver's side and imagine Jayden sitting behind the wheel. His arm is against the seat and he leans into me. His eyes fill with desire and my heart pounds with fear.

I have never been frightened of Jayden; I am scared of his power over me.

My heart twists like a pretzel, consumed by visions. My skin tingles with remembrances, and my senses fill with Jayden. *What has he done to me? Oh, God, what has this man done to me?* The slight odor of aftershave in his car causes me to feel weak and dizzy.

I climb from his car, press the *lock* button and my skin jumps in panic. Jayden locked me in his car. For one moment, I thought he was going to rape me, and he was instead gentle. I hated myself for being weak and giving into him in Canada. I moaned and groaned under his hands that could work magic on a woman's body. I had wanted him so badly despite the tricks he played on me and his harsh spoken words. I had still desired him even though he broke my heart.

Traci runs across the street. "Mommy. Mommy," she yells.

"Traci. Oh, Traci." *I almost lost my baby.*

"Uncle Jayden?" Her lip trembles.

"He's okay." I blow my nose on my blouse. "Your uncle is in the hospital, but he's fine."

Traci claps her hands and we both walk into the house, my hand clenching her shoulder.

Millie had bathed Traci, washed her hair, and loaned her some clothes of Joanie's. I make a mental note to remember to thank Millie.

The kitchen is a mess. The new refrigerator and freezer were not delivered yesterday since I was at the hospital.

I spend the next morning grinding up spoils in the disposal.

No one should ever put the beauty of a rose in a garbage can. The kitchen counter is a better place. And like the red rose that had been in the freezer, my heart begins to thaw. *Jayden!* I sway, clinging to the counter. *He could have drowned, and I never thanked him for saving Traci. I simply ran away from him at the hospital as I always do.*

Quick, I phone Riley who is in a bad mood from waking up. She worked until 2:30 in the morning last night at the bar and got home around 3:30.

“You have to take care of Traci,” I plead.

“Why?” Riley is instantly awake, her grumpy mood forgotten.

“I have to go to the hospital and visit Jayden.” I explain to Riley what happened.

“I’ll be right over,” she says.

I pace on the front porch, my purse slung across my shoulder, and keys dangling from my hand.

Riley raises her eyebrow at my short skirt and heels. “You’re dressed more like you’re going to a nightclub than a hospital.”

I am arguing with Traci so ignore Riley’s remark.

“Why can’t I come?” Traci stares defiantly.

“Because I told you, Traci, you’re not allowed to visit your Uncle Jayden in the hospital because you are too young.”

“Well, sneak me into his room then.”

“No. You stay here with Aunt Riley. Do you want me to buy flowers for him and say they are from you?”

“Give him this instead.” Traci reaches up and kisses my cheek.

I look at Riley with dismay. She chuckles. “Try getting out of this.”

“Uh, okay, Traci, I’ll kiss your uncle for you.” I cross my fingers behind my back. “I have got to go now.”

I make a quick stop at a department store and then drive to the hospital. I dart into the gift shop and then punch the button of the elevator that will take me to Jayden's room.

Chapter 83

RONNI

Flowers engulf my arms and my head peeks out from a huge heart-shaped balloon.

I feel like the biggest fool who ever lived. I rushed over here to the hospital, driving like a bat out of hell, only to find Jayden lying against some pillows, his arms behind his head, flirting with a blonde nurse. She sits on his bed, swinging her foot, her white nurse's uniform halfway up her thigh.

Jayden throws back his head and laughs as if the nurse just said the funniest thing.

Not once has he looked in my direction. I turn around to leave.

“Hey, Ronni!”

I spin.

“Uh, excuse us,” he tells the nurse who looks disappointed.

“Are those for me?” He raises an eyebrow at the vase of white flowers in my arms, white for truce.

I set the flowers down.

“I would have thrown myself in the creek a long time ago if I knew you'd bring me flowers, Ronni. Is there a note?”

“A note isn't necessary since I'm delivering the flowers in person.”

“Thank you for the flowers, Ronni. That is kind of you.” He stares with a curious expression on his face. “What would you have said if there was a note?”

“How's your head?” I cannot stop my voice from shaking. He got the nurse all hot and bothered so Jayden is not near death, but a concussion can be deceiving.

“My head is fine, a little sore perhaps but nothing a couple of aspirin won't fix. You, on the other hand, are trembling and your face is pale.”

“How's your heart?”

“So how come you're suddenly so interested in my heart, Ronni?”

“Well, you are at a Heart Hospital. I figured they would check out your heart while you were here.”

He appears deflated by my answer. “I have been hallucinating. I could have sworn you were in my room last night or early this morning, but it must have been the coma. When I woke up, I was all alone.”

“You must have imagined I was here.”

Again, he appears slightly depressed. “What's in the bag?”

“I figured your clothes were pretty muddied so I brought you some.”

“Not a funeral suit, I hope?”

“Of course not.”

“Good, because it will be some time before you dance at my funeral, Ronni.”

What have I done to make him even think such a cruel thing? His eyes are laughing. Damn him—why did I even come? “Thank you for what you did for Traci.” My voice is as small as he makes me feel.

“There is no need for thanks.” He shrugs his shoulders and appears hurt.

“Well, it was a heroic thing to do.”

“How is she, my niece?”

“Traci is fine. She is with my friend, Riley.”

He swings his legs over the side of the bed. “The doctor was just in here telling me I can go home.” He looks at me expectantly.

I remember what happened last time I was alone in a car with Jayden. I offer in a reluctant voice, “Well, do you need a ride?”

“That would be convenient since my car is over at your place.” He adds in an exasperated voice, “Are you going to watch me get dressed?”

“No!” I yank the curtain around the bed.

After a few of minutes, he emerges from behind the curtain fully clothed. “Just my size.” He grins. “You must have my body memorized.”

I feel like throwing the flowers at him but instead say, “Well, you are the same size as Brad was.”

Jayden actually blushes.

You wore his Comfyballs underwear and made me feel uncomfortable. You wore his coat and left me out in the cold. You wore his gloves and choked the life out of me. You wore his shoes and trampled my heart.

“Let’s go.” He limps towards the door.

“You never told me you injured your leg.”

“My ankle, but it’s just a slight sprain.”

“Aren’t we supposed to wait for the nurse to bring a wheelchair or something?”

“Screw a wheelchair. I’m fine.”

I roll my eyes and offer him my shoulder to lean on.

He clings to me as we make our way over to the elevator, pulling me closer and breathing on my scalp. “You once asked me if it was possible for two people to begin again,” he says.

“Yes.” I punch the button and the elevator pops open.

“Yes, it is possible or yes, you remember?”

I simply step into the elevator.

Jayden hesitates. He appears weary, I suppose from the accident. There is a look of reflection on his face, and he says in a somber voice with no trace of laughter whatsoever, “Ronni, I apologize for the masquerade. I am soulfully sorry that Brad and I hurt you. I never wanted the lawsuit but there was no way you would ever let me see Traci. Do you think it possible you can ever find it in your heart to forgive me?”

Tears cloud my eyes and my heart squeezes in my chest like a sponge.
Why is he asking for forgiveness after all this time?

It seems he can read my mind and he shoves a foot out to prevent the elevator from closing. “I could have died and gone to my grave with you on my conscience.”

Oh, is that all. He feels guilty.

The walk to the parking lot never seemed so long.

Chapter 84

JAYDEN

“This isn’t the way to your house,” I said in a grumpy voice. My foot was throbbing. I escaped from the hospital since the doctor really did not release me. I checked the x-rays and brain scan and there was nothing wrong with me that a good wrap around my ankle would not help along with a few aspirin. Yeah, I am one of those idiot doctors who believes in self-cure.

“You just took the Sixth Street exit, Ronni.”

“Well you said you’re okay.”

“I am.”

“Can I interest you in a game of pool then, Dr. Tremblay? I win, I get what I want.”

“And what do I get, princess?”

“You win, you get whatever you want, Jayden. It is a blind game. After the game, then we’ll name the win.”

She pulled into a parking place and shoved her hand out so we could shake on it. “Promise you’ll give me whatever I want if I win?” She refused to let go of my hand until I answered.

I gave her a guarded look, hiding my panic, and said, “Yes.”

“Good. Let’s go play some pool then. You, uh, sure you’re feeling up to it?”

Now she asks if I am feeling strong enough to play pool. I did not confess that I was extremely weak, but only where Ronni was concerned, which is why I agreed to play. She wore a short skirt and I imagined her leaning across the pool table, her skirt riding her butt and some panty showing. I swallowed. *Yeah, I am feeling really, really up to it.*

She was sneaky. I had paid no attention to where she parked, and the car ended up at Lovejoys again. "Can't we go somewhere else? I lost to you before here. There is such a thing as bad karma and you're not playing fair," I said like a sulky child. "Besides, their felt is green."

She laughed. "Your face is green. By the way, I almost forgot. Traci told me to give you this."

Ronni shocked the hell out of me. She leaned across the seat and kissed my cheek. She really was playing unfair, getting me all wound up with her lips when I needed to be calm to play pool. She was setting me up. The odds were she would win. Blind bet indeed, she would order me to move back to Canada and never see Traci again.

She held her hand out. "I'll give you one more chance to decide since you accuse me of being unfair. Do you agree to play pool with me at Lovejoys on a blind win?"

I looked at her extended hand and licked my lips. This was it, the chance for Ronni to get me out of her life for good. She would kick my ass in pool. There was no way I could beat a pool shark like her. She could overturn the lawsuit with a bet. Nevertheless, stupid me held out my hand and shook hers. I was too macho to back out now. "Agreed," I said too speedily before I changed my mind and showed my yellow backside.

"Come on then," she said.

She walked fast, probably to tire me into losing. The woman had no mercy for an injured man. I limped after her, cussing myself out for not demanding a handicap, like the first seven balls. The bandage on my head should have earned me a handicap for the eight ball. Face it; I had no balls where she was concerned.

Oh, yeah, she played the nurse all right once we were inside. She tried to drown my brain in alcohol to make me drunk so I would lose. Sweat poured from my forehead and Ronni dabbed my head with a napkin soaked in whiskey, probably thinking my sweat was because of the accident. *Yeah, my old buddy Whiskey, soak into my brain and numb me.*

I had hoped to bleed my heroic actions for all it was worth but I was the biggest fool in the world, gambling everything on one game of pool with a hustler.

“Should you be drinking? Aren’t you on drugs?” she said while pouring another shot of whiskey down my throat with a devilish gleam in her eye.

“After this game I will get stinking drunk,” I mumbled and then ordered the bartender to, “Hit me with another whiskey.”

“I’ll break,” I snapped at her and aimed dead center for the balls. My face paled because only one ball went into a pocket. I squinted. My eyes were blurry from hospital drugs, whiskey, pain, or all of the above.

I cursed myself for missing the next ball. Pride filled my chest because I stopped myself from picking up the ball with my hand and making a basket in the pocket, sort of like a game of dwarf basketball.

I cursed Ronni when she made four balls in a row before missing.

I sobered, playing as if my life depended on this game, which it did. Her short skirt distracted me. “Pool shark wore it on purpose,” I mumbled.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

I really tried not to gape at Ronni when it was her turn to shoot, but her butt drew my eyes like ants to a picnic, the way she leaned over the table. Her skirt rode up right below her rear end, giving me a panty flash. My head swam and my blood pounded, and I had a hell of a time concentrating on my next shot.

Damn her! What a cheater. She wore red flashing underwear on purpose just so I would lose. She was using my own nature against me with this...this sick attraction I had for her.

As usual, Ronni played like Minnesota Fats from that movie *The Hustler*.

After just three rounds, I had six balls on the table and Ronni had only the eight ball left, and the eight ball was about an inch from the top corner, right pocket.

I hung my head and groaned. *You Idiot! This is it. May as well hang up your cue stick. Even Traci could make that shot. I'll be on my way back to Canada...*I checked my watch...*in about four minutes.*

I turned away from the pool table and went to hang up my pool stick, feeling sick to my stomach.

Ronni actually had the nerve to say loudly for the entire bar to hear, “I just love a man who knows when he is beat.” She laughed. “Eight ball. Back corner. Left pocket.”

My shoulders slumped in defeat. This last shot was it.

I spun around. Wait a minute. Did she say back corner, left pocket instead of top corner, right pocket? Why would she risk losing and not take the easy shot?

Because she wanted to show off, of course, and rub in how good she was.

I watched with stunned eyes, Ronni purposefully shoot the eight ball straight into the top corner, right pocket, the pocket she should have called, the pocket that was so easy.

“You must have accidentally made the wrong call,” I said.

Ronni leaned on her pool stick and grinned. “I called the shot correctly. Well, Dr. Tremblay, I scratched on the eight ball which means I lose and you win.”

She was smiling. Ronni was actually smiling at me.

I must have been dreaming. Maybe I was still in a coma. I touched the pool table. It was made from real felt.

Ronni lost on purpose. *On purpose.* Why would she lose? Unless...Unless...

I locked eyes with Ronni. *Say it!* I urged her with my eyes to *please, please say the words I long to hear*. I begged her with my face. She already met me halfway by deliberately losing, or so I thought, so I hoped. Now I needed her to come to me, all the way. Ronni never said she forgave me. She had to be the one to make the first move.

With long strides and eyes glittering like a woman who knew exactly what she wanted, Ronni walked up to me.

I simply stared back at her and thought, *Is she going to slap me again?*

Ronni stood on her toes and wrapped her arms around my neck.

I simply blinked at her, hardly daring to breathe.

“I want you, Jayden Tremblay,” she said in a gentle voice.

My breathing was ragged.

“I need you, Jayden Tremblay,” she said and touched her lips with mine.

There was a pain in my chest as if my heart was exploding.

Her eyes sparkled. “You are impossible, Jayden Tremblay, but I can't stand the thought of being without you, a world without you, of never seeing your face again.”

I rested my forehead against her forehead and rubbed my mind with hers because I could not believe this was happening. I had wanted too long and waited too long.

“You're maddening, Jayden Tremblay, but I'm only complete when I'm with you. And even though you've put me through hell...”

I started to open my mouth and she touched my lips with her finger. “Hush now, it's all okay. Love is still love by any other name and I realize now that what you did, you did out of love for Traci.”

“For you, too, Ronni. All I have ever done was because of you.”

She swallowed nervously. “I’m about to dive off a cliff here but I must confess that I do love you, Jayden, with all of my heart, all of my mind, and all of my soul. All I want is to be with you, to love you, to be swept away by you. Always. You win. I surrender. So what do you want for your blind win, Jayden?”

She looked up at me expectantly, her face raw and vulnerable.

I stroked her hair and whispered into her ear, “I want only you, Ronni. Always you, my Love, forever. From the very first, until the very last all I ever wanted, all I ever wished for is you. I want my face to be the last thing you see before you go to sleep at night and the first thing you see when you wake up in the morning. No one can guarantee future happiness but without you, my today, tomorrow, next week, next month, next year, is an endless time of nothingness. I only felt alive again when you found me in Canada.”

I bent Ronni over my arm and kissed her.

My identical twin and I, though separated at birth, lived similar lives. We were both doctors. We murdered and framed someone for our crimes. We both technically raped Ronni and in the end, we probably both married her. The statistics were correct; identical twins often marry a woman with the same name. The experts were just in the dark about how we sometimes reach that sameness. Whoever said that blood is thicker than water did not know Brad O’Boyle.

Did you know when kissing Ronni that I actually lifted my leg and thumped my foot against the floor the way a dog does when his master pets him behind the ear?

Yeah, everyone at Lovejoys clapped.

Man, I love that place!

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Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Belinda", followed by a large, stylized flourish that loops around to the right.

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